THE JIG OF GRACE: SOMETIMES LIMPING, SOMETIMES LEAPING

A RELATIONAL THEODICY FOR EQUIPPING THE SAINTS FOR MINISTRY

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Julie A. Carmean

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ABSTRACT

THE JIG OF GRACE: SOMETIMES LIMPING, SOMETIMES LEAPING

by Julie A. Carmean

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This model of ministry was a theological study, a project to help a group of members of Eastmont United Methodist Church, Dayton, Ohio, work through the issues of theodicy. Films and short stories were used to help us focus on the nature of God in light of the realities of suffering, evil, and goodness. In thirteen, two hour sessions the group members surveyed theodicy as they examined their own spiritual and theological struggles with this topic. Three different evaluation tools were used at the beginning and end of the project. These demonstrated theological and spiritual growth within each participant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing this document and implementing the project was itself "A Jig of Grace"...and within the jig were many dancers, partners with God as they supported, guided, challenged, encouraged, and loved me throughout the dance.

I thank all the churches with which I have ever participated for their partnership in ministry and for all I have learned from each of them.

My mere words fail to express my gratitude to Eastmont United Methodist Church. I am deeply indebted to this congregation of loving, laughing, dancing, thinking people who have supported and encouraged me, praying me through this doctoral program and the preparation of this document. In our ministry together we have *experienced* the issues of theodicy; we have known evil, grief, goodness, and joy and we have received grace upon grace.

Ten persons from Eastmont participated directly in the project giving abundantly of their time and energy. I thank Barbara Beach, Cathy Beard, Gary Carmean, Bill Darner, Grace Newman, Derek Petrey, John Stuckey, Mitzi Stuckey, Liz Tindell, and Doris Whittaker-Stegeman for their

enthusiastic discussions, their willingness to not only be vulnerable but to receive my vulnerability as well, and for their dedication to this project. One participant commented that our time together was sacred, indeed it was, and I shall cherish this group always.

The patience, good humor, commitment, and word processing skill of my friend Doris Whittaker-Stegeman blessed each page of this document. I do not know what I would have done without her perseverance and encouragement.

The input of each of my consultants was helpful in the design and implementation of this project. I thank Dr. Ed McNulty, Andrew Hudgins, and Erin McGraw for their time and their suggestions. Erin's willing and empathetic ear and her insightful comments were particularly useful throughout the implementation of the project.

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How can I thank my mentor and friend, Dr. Tyron Inbody? His teaching skill, his patient guidance, and his seldom recognized optimism were invaluable.

Finally, I thank my family...

My parents, Bob and Colis Hudgins, for teaching me of God's love through their own and for their faithful support.

My parents-in-law, Ned and Norma Carmean, for their love, example, and encouragement.

My daughter, Heather, who always knew just when to come in and rub my shoulders as I hunched over the computer. Her, "How's it going, Mom?" kept me going.

My son, Joshua, who left his computer games willingly when I needed to work and brought me cups of tea and kisses just when I needed them.

And last but not least, I thank my husband, Gary, my partner in this dance and in life. I thank God for Gary's steadfast love and encouraging spirit.

PREFACE

I am indebted to Kathleen Sands for the title of this document, *The Jig of Grace: Sometimes Limping, Sometimes Leaping.* In *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology,* Sands mentions "the limping jig of grace."[1] This phrase not only caught my eye but my imagination as well. Indeed, God's grace sometimes does seem to be limping. How can one say otherwise in the face of radical evil? However, even a limp is a movement of hope. Jacob left Penuel limping, yet blessed and with a new name.[2] Moreover, Sands' image is not merely one of limping grace but of the limping *jig* of grace. Though God's grace may sometimes limp it is ever a dance, a dance between God and God's creation. Here is where I must add to Sands' image, the jig, the dance, not only limps, it leaps. How can one say otherwise in the face of radical goodness?

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[1]Kathleen Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 168.

[2]See Genesis 32:24-31, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

God's grace, God's radical goodness, is ever–faithful, always willing the best possible good in any given situation. At times all grace can do is limp, at times it leaps, at all times it dances...and the dance is always re-creational and relational.

PART ONE:

FOUNDATIONAL RESOURCES

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

I've forgotten the name of the television drama but I've never forgotten the essence of a portion of the dialogue. The main character's mother was suffering desperately from a particularly vicious form of cancer. One day, distraught over her mother's misery and her own helplessness, the daughter confided her despair to a friend. Her friend told her to remember that God would never give her anything she was not strong enough to handle. The daughter replied, "Great. So if I was a weaker person my mother would not have cancer." My sentiments exactly.

Persons, meaning well, often recite platitudes that for many others are devoid of meaning or are even offensive. Some amongst us even hear these words from our own lips, hear their dissonance and wonder from whence they come. It seems to me that we are so steeped in the teachings of classical theism that we spout these teachings without realizing we are doing so and even when we do not truly mean what we are saying. Throughout my ministry I have encountered many persons whose life experiences and their reflections upon them move them to call the god of theism into question.

Some of these persons, finding no opportunity to air these questions in the church of their upbringing have simply left, giving up on religion, giving up on the Church, giving up on God. Others keep their questions and reservations quiet, having been told when they have tried to broach the topic that they lack faith or even that they are not Christian. Others struggle with their feelings of guilt for thinking things they believe they should not think. Still others have rejected much of what they were taught but they cannot yet "erase the tapes," they have not yet discovered how to honor what they desire to retain or how to incorporate it into their current understanding; they have not made peace with their past nor with their new ideas. Another important aspect of this discussion is the tension between finding words to express the God one has known in one's life and creating God in an image of one's own making.

My model of ministry was to give persons an arena in which to discuss the "stuff" of their lives, the awesome delight, the heart-rending suffering, the spirit-breaking evil. To this arena, this sanctuary, folks were invited to bring their questions, doubts, fears, awe, delight, with the assurance that each journey will be heard and honored. As this project began it was my prayerful hope that healing and growth would occur and that persons would discover anew the very fullness of God, a God who is with us in the "stuff" of our lives seeking to bring about the best that is humanly and godly possible.

In the first section of chapter one I look at "the stuff" of my own life through the lens of theodicy.

Theodicy, like the larger discipline of theology, is not mere intellectual intrigue. The ideas, issues, events caught up in the word "theodicy" make up a large part of a pastor's day as she strives to live out her call to serve God's children. The second section of chapter one describes my current context for ministry as it represents the larger context of the Christian Church. It is to this context that persons come with their pain, their questions, their wonder, and their joy. It was my hope that this project would help to integrate persons' theological understandings with their life experiences. We should not have to compartmentalize, keeping what we think separate from what we believe. If God is in relationship with us, as I claim, then what we believe about God must also be related to what we experience to be true. My purpose was not to encourage persons to reject the god of theism, although this is what I have done in my own theological construction as the reader will discover in chapters two through six, the theological and pastoral foundation for this model of ministry.

One of the currents running throughout this project is my conviction that a person's concept of God is directly related to how one comports one's life routinely and in times of crisis. It is the responsibility of the church to teach carefully and well. The church must not abuse its power. When my

daughter's classmate committed suicide a friend of hers told me that his church teaches that those who kill themselves burn in hell. This is a travesty and a perversion of all that is holy. What system of belief, what religion, would teach its children that those who end their lives burn forever in perpetual fire? Misery, turmoil, pain and suffering in this life are not enough to satisfy the hunger of a wrathful god? Is this the god these children think is worshipped in the Christian church, the Jewish synagogue? What system of belief would teach that God had the power to save this young person's life but did not use it? Such a belief system mocks the children's prayer, "God is great, God is good..."

This project was an attempt to help persons work through such dilemmas. The project's focus, however, was not on the issues of suffering, tragedy, evil, and goodness but on the nature of God in light of these realities. The purpose of this project was to provide a forum for theological reflection so that participants could grow in their understanding of the related concepts of God and God's activity in the world. This purpose was based upon my claim that one's image of God is directly related to how one responds to life, to life's crises and tragedies, and to life's goodness.

A group of church members met weekly for thirteen weeks to discuss a video and/or short story which deals with theological issues in a non-theological manner. The use of popular culture perhaps stemmed foremost

from my own propensity to "see" theological truth where it may not be intended. Throughout my life and my ministry I have not been inclined to make hard and fast distinctions between the "secular" and the "sacred." My experience is that God pops up in surprising places, even in the popular culture of rock music, film, and literature.

In addition to my own intuitive sense or propensity, it is a given, I believe, that persons today are more inclined to rent a video than to pick up a theological tome. Indeed, many may be more likely to go to the movies or turn on the television than to turn to the study of scripture. In this project movies and stories were used as a springboard for theological reflection.

Chapter seven examines the rationale for the use of film and literature in this project and the project design. Chapter eight describes the implementation of the project. The evaluation process itself and the evaluative comments of the participants make up the first section of chapter nine. The chapter's second section evaluates the project in relation to my personal and professional goals as well as considering what would be done differently should I implement this project again. Theological reflection is the crux of chapter ten. What new issues am I considering as a result of this project? What did this pastor learn as she walked through this theological study with parishioners? Finally, chapter eleven is a "scratch and sniff"

section–a brief overview of the entire project for the reader who may want to experience its fragrance without becoming immersed in the entire document.

A. THE "STUFF" OF MY EXISTENCE

Is everyone's childhood cloaked retrospectively in a mythical, mystical mist of memory and metaphor? How does one extricate one's real memories from the family stories told and appropriated into one's memory; how is one affected by events untrue yet believed to be true for most of a childhood?

As many mothers do my mother has often told me the story of my birth. After allowing Mom to hold me for a few minutes the nurse took me to the nursery. Mom tells me how her room was filled with a presence she attributed to God and she was assured by this presence that I was special, that I was meant to do something important. Though my mother is a woman of great faith she is not prone to claiming this type of "vision." I don't know what to make of her experience–it was hers, not mine. However, she shared it with me as gift. Somehow my mother was able to relate this story to me time and time again without using it against me. Though it sometimes embarrassed me, I don't think it ever pressured me. It was shared as a symbol of her love and of God's. This is an experience of love and of God that became a given in my life. What does it mean to a child to grow up with such a story?

One of my earliest memories, one I rather matter-of-factly carried with me for years, is of the time I was visited by an angel. I remember it well. I was recovering from an illness. In my preschool years I was prone to high fevers for no apparent or ever diagnosed reason. Answering a knock at the door my mother invited into our home a woman I did not know. After visiting with my mother for a few minutes the woman leaned over me, brushed my forehead with her fingertips and assured me that I would be all right. I recall what she looked like and I remember the tone of her voice. I recollect this as taking place in our North Carolina home from which we moved when I was two and a half years old. Until I was ten or eleven years old I thought of this as the time I was visited by an angel. One day I asked my mom if she remembered the lady who visited when I was sick. I described the scene to her but she did not remember. I decided it was not really an angel and began to "write if off" as a nice lady, perhaps a salesperson, who wished me well when I was sick. What is important, or so it seems to me, is not to discover what actually happened, but to discern the significance of the perceived memory. The intriguing question is what difference did it make that I, throughout my formative years, believed resolutely and matter-of-factly that I had been visited by an angel, a kind and caring angel?

The angel's visit was consistent with what I was learning from my home environment. I was raised by loving parents who apparently taught

me of God from my earliest days, for I do not remember a time when I was unaware of God. I do not remember a time when I did not think about God. Indeed, God was a topic of much interest and curiosity. As a preschooler I wondered often about God's origins–I remember asking my older sister about God's mommy and daddy. God had to come from somewhere and given my environment it was natural to create a family for God. Though later my thoughts were to become more complex and the questions more troubling, it seems that the concept of God has always been a fertile thinking ground for me. But, of course, it was years before God became a concept. God was first the One responsible for my being alive, the One my parents said loved and cared for me, the One who made blue sky and bluer ocean, my first puppy and my little brother, the One I wondered about and questioned, talked to and loved in return.

My conviction that God is first and foremost benevolent and loving must have its roots in these early experiences of warmth, caring, and love. My ongoing theological conversation and wonderment must also have begun in my earliest questions which were listened to and discussed by those who loved me.

As I grew my experiences broadened and my world view expanded. I was still rather young when I first heard the family story of my cousin who died before I was born. Her mother fell asleep at the steering wheel and

veered off the road. A generation before protective carseats, two-year-old Andrea, asleep in the backseat, was thrown from the car. The coroner said there was not a scratch on her, she died because she landed on one piece of barbed wire which pierced her jugular. The image horrified me. How weird that she would survive the accident only to be killed by a single piece of wire. I began to realize the fragility and unpredictability of life.

The sixties began when I was five years old, the same year my family moved to Toledo, Ohio. Totally unaware was I of the tumultuous changes the decade would bring, both within myself and in the world around me. Many of the events of my growing up years greatly impacted my life and my thinking, philosophically, politically, and theologically. The first time I saw my father cry was when President John Kennedy was killed and I remember my own thirteen-year-old sobs when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, then later when the Kent State killings occurred, then when a boy I knew died in Vietnam, and when Nixon was re-elected and it seemed that the war was just going to continue even as our government sank into corruption and cover-up.

Though I was only eight I still remember the grief and shock shrouding my family and seemingly the nation when Kennedy was assassinated; I remember seeing Jack Ruby step out of the crowd and shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. The response confused me: Were people glad to see Oswald die or was it a tragedy too? Only five years later Dr. King, a man I

greatly admired, a sane compassionate witness in the midst of insane hatred, was slain. When I heard of the shooting I dropped what I was carrying, began to cry, feeling an overwhelming despair. Two years later persons close to my own age were gunned down by members of our own military on a campus not far from my hometown; I was scared, shocked, confused, disillusioned, and angry.

And yet...I remember being exhilarated by good music, and wonderful poetry, words playing with words in delightful array. I remember good friends, the terrifying joy of first love. I talked with God a lot as I grew up, talking through the events of the world, of my life. During my junior year in high school my English teacher assigned a novel which had a tremendous impact on my thinking, politically, socially, and theologically: Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The story of the Joad family helped me formulate more fluidly what I intuited real Christianity to be: faith turned into action, belief into behavior, Christ-like sharing of the self which leads to one's own sense of who he or she is.

As I grew up much of my life centered around church, though in high school I also was very involved in journalism and worked part-time as a waitress. Writing editorials on current topics for our school paper and serving the public in a very busy mall restaurant opened my eyes further to the ambiguity of the world.

In the restaurant I was continually surprised by the rudeness and aggressiveness of many people. Many men seemed to think I was there not only to serve food but to serve any other whim or need as well. Given no invitation other than the offer to take their orders, what gave them the right to speak to me as they did? I found this disturbing, distressing, and maddening. I saw parents mistreat small children just because everyone was wearied by a day of shopping. Here they were, all their new possessions stuffed into the booth with them, a day of shopping at the new mall surrounding them and they slap their children for reaching for the salt shaker without permission. Surly and curt with me, surlier and even more brusque with their own. Eye-opening and sad. I also saw my employer pinch another waitress on the wrist until her skin was reddened just to get her to move faster. I remember explaining to him that he could not do this and that we would report him if he continued the abuse. At the time I knew all these things were wrong and imbalanced; years later I could see how each was related to the other–each incident was abuse of power. This little restaurant was a microcosm of the larger society. My first "real job" plunked me right into this society's midst, the good and the bad. I learned to be more assertive, increased my skill in negotiating the tricky passageway of trust versus caution...and I learned always to be kind to waitresses and waiters.

When I was fourteen years old I was sexually assaulted by a stranger. When I was sixteen one of my teachers was fired for sexually harassing me, then "rescued" by the teacher's union and merely assigned to a different school. During my college years I heard via one of his colleagues that he had been charged again with similar offenses.

On the one hand, these abuses, committed by individuals and by systems (and in tandem with the previously mentioned abuses being perpetrated in the larger society), planted seeds of cynicism and left scars. On the other hand, these abuses introduced me to my own inner resources of resiliency, strength, and a healthy strain of cynicism which somehow promotes healing. My intuition told me this, "Okay, this happened, deal with it and go on. Be a survivor, not a victim." Actually, I am amazed now how well I coped with those experiences. Although I kept the assault a secret from my family for several years, I credit my parents' example of a loving male/female relationship as part of the reason I was able to work through what had happened to me.

During this same time my church, a United Methodist congregation, was experiencing a theological shift. It began with a lay witness mission when visitors came to our church for a weekend to witness to the power of Christ in their lives. A few years earlier I had chosen the Christian path for myself. Jesus' message of self-giving love, of bold humility, of deep

compassion for all people had caught my imagination and my heart. The message of the lay missioners seemed to me to be another message–it was the message of "get saved" or perish, believe like we are telling you or go to hell. There seemed to be more threat than hope, more warning than promise. On the Saturday of that weekend some of us in the youth group were planning to attend a rock concert at our downtown arena. The leader of the mission team came to me since I was youth group president and told me she thought it would be unwise of us to attend. She had heard the arena was like a "den of iniquity" and it would be sinful to go. She even offered our group money if we would not attend the concert. She did, however, encourage us to go to the neighborhood McDonalds to hand out copies of the "Four Spiritual Laws." I was unfamiliar with this strain of Christianity, the triumphalism, the Jesus-only concept, the judgment of other persons. In response to the lay witness mission some people in our congregation began judging who was truly "born again," who was "Spirit-filled." This judgment extended to our new minister who was deemed by many to be too "liberal" but who taught me much about compassion and who helped to deepen my commitment to Christ as one who provided not only the example for our lives in the image of God but also the model for changing society. Salvation existed not in accepting and reciting certain "spiritual laws" but in seeing and serving the Christ in the least of these and in all God's children.

Through the routine and the intense, the good and the bad, the ease and the struggle, the joy and the pain, I held onto my foundational conviction of God's loving presence. There were moments it did not seem like enough; these were the times I shouted at God to try harder. There were moments when God's realm was glimpsed in the here and the now; these were the times bright with wonder, awe, and delight.

While at the University of Toledo working on a degree in special education Gary Carmean and I were married. The Carmeans were charter members of my home church, and our families have known each other since I was nine. Gary directed the church choir and together we advised the UMYF. Five years after we were married our daughter Heather was born. On the way home from the hospital we stopped at church and knelt with our new child–later she was baptized by our minister and my father who had been called to ministry while I was in college. I understood and responded to my father's call to ministry in a way I only later understood as being water on the seeds of my call.

Shortly after our son Joshua's birth in 1980 I began to reflect upon many things–it was not a "post-partum" introspection, but a new realization that this was the time to make some decisions. My life, my family's life, centered in the church. Due to its theological focus we had left our home church and had joined an urban congregation where we were involved at

every level of church life. One day my pastor and friend mentioned seminary–"Why don't you go?"–I looked at the infant in my arms and laughed. In good company, I asked, "Who me?" "Why Me?", talked a lot, prayed more, shook my head in wonder often, and found myself before my congregation December 5, 1981, seeking their approval of my candidacy for ordained ministry.

I hoped to start seminary sometime in 1983, though I was still unsure about timing, tuition, and logistics. However, those questions became meaningless for awhile. My father was killed December 19, 1982 in a freakish car accident in his parsonage driveway. My mom and children were with him, though not physically injured. Words strain and crack trying to describe the horror of that night and of the next days. Nor are words capable of describing the grace that held us then and has sustained us since. The Church community–local, district, and conference–responded to us in loving, caring ways. We were surrounded and upheld by God in ways too numerous and mysterious to mention or comprehend.

However, we did hear jarring responses from many–"It must be God's will," "God needed your Dad in heaven," my mom even received a letter from a pastor which began "Hallelujah! your husband is dead!" and went on to assure us that since Dad was in heaven with God we had only to rejoice, this of course being the only faithful and Christian response. Years later as my

mom began to show some signs of emotional recovery and new strength a family friend commented that perhaps God had "work" for my mother to do and that is why God "took" my dad, so that my mom could become more independent. Talk about a weak God–only able to strengthen a person by killing off a loved one! Obviously, all of these responses are lacking. God did not cause my father's accidental death, God was unable to stop the chain of events which caused the accident, yet God was there providing what was needed in the aftermath of the accident. God was in the neighbors who found my mother running hysterically up the street screaming for help as she clutched her grandbabies to her. Some took her to their house, some took my children to their home–comfort was given, paramedics called, a priest and another pastor, good friends of Dad were summoned and people located my husband and me in Toledo. God was in the arms of the first paramedic at the scene, a young man of Dad's congregation who loved him. The accident killed my father instantly and his body was covered by debris, but when they found him, the young paramedic cradled Dad in his arms and held him.

Life as we had known it was changed after Dad's death. Mom was back in Toledo, trying to keep her life together even as she had lost most everything that had mattered to her. She was broken and needed our presence and support. And as we each tried to work through our grief, I knew

that now was not the time to uproot my little children, who had been through so much. Seminary must wait for awhile. However, ministry did not.

Six months after my father's death I was hired as director of education and program by a large suburban church. I had mixed feelings about leaving my volunteer urban ministry for a position in suburbia–cheap, liberal guilt perhaps. I was soon to re-learn that the least, the last, the lost live everywhere. The joys and concerns of folks seem universal.

As trust was established persons began to share their lives with me. I remember Peggy who came to me grieving for her dead child. "I grieve for my baby," she said, "but I also grieve for my God. I have always been told and always believed that God would protect me and my loved ones. God did not. I have lost God, too." Peggy and I talked and talked over the course of several months–we talked a lot about motherhood, about our children, about our love for our families. One day I reminded her of her youngest son's love for his favorite teddy bear, the one who accompanied him everywhere. I asked Peggy if she would sneak into her son's room at night and take the bear from him. She exclaimed that she would never do such a thing, she knew how much he loved and needed that bear and her love for her son would not allow her to intentionally hurt him. We then talked about how God's love is such a love, yet even greater. God, the protector, became God,

the mother. God did not take Peggy's baby, but God would see her through the loss. Peggy later gave birth to a daughter she named Grace.

This experience and others like it convinced me that persons' concepts of God determine how they respond to life and its crises. Peggy had been taught that God would protect her from harm. God was protector, defined precisely, and little more. When God did not protect her, allowing her baby to die, God died too. Indeed not only did she blame God for not being the protector God was claimed to be, she blamed "him" for killing her baby. It was only as she expanded her image of God that she realized the depth of God's love is not protection but presence.

As ministry has continued I've encountered many, many persons who are trying to reconcile what they have been taught about God with what they have experienced and/or with what they intuit God to be. Sometimes folks just need permission to ask the questions of their hearts. Thus, I hear, "Why does God allow people to suffer?" "If God is really all-powerful and truly good, then why doesn't God stop all the bad things that happen in the world?" "What is God really like, is God really capable of killing all those little innocent Egyptian babies. If so, I know I should fear such a God, but why worship?" "I was taught God's wrath and punishing judgment, do you think that is why I judge others and am so unforgiving and unforgivable?" "If I don't deserve the suffering, should I think I deserve the joy? And how

can I define one without the other?" "When my mother died people told me it was God's will. I didn't believe it was, but I feel guilty. Am I less of a Christian because I can't accept her death as God's will?"

Persons are asking the questions of theodicy, not as mere intellectual exercise, but because these are the questions of our existence, of God's and humanity's nature. These are the questions of the stuff of life, replete with its ambiguity, its pain, and its beauty.

B. EASTMONT CHURCH, A PARTNER IN THE JIG

The other day this pastor visited an eighty-five year old woman who is a member of Eastmont United Methodist Church, the congregation I serve. The conversation was far-ranging, taking in the day's headlines, family news, and the death of the woman's youngest sister a year earlier. Though a professing Christian the sister had never been baptized. It was not the first time the woman and I had discussed this particular issue; sometimes the tears just spill over, the older sister still worrying about what God must have thought, about what God might have done when her sister appeared at the gate unbaptized. We talked again about the sister's faith, her compassion, her sense of humor, and we talked about her love of God and of God's love for her. "I know God wouldn't have sent her to the other place," the woman said of her sister and of God, "but some people say you have to be baptized to go to

heaven; didn't Jesus say it too? But I'm not going to worry about it anymore, I just can't believe God would send someone like her away...I don't think that's what the Bible means..."

People *are* asking the questions of the stuff of life, replete with its ambiguity, its pain, and its beauty. My current ministry context is no different; it is in this place that my model of ministry project found its legs. Welcome to Eastmont Church.

Eastmont United Methodist Church has been in existence for forty-three years, established in 1953 as a mission church in the Eastmont community. Formerly an Evangelical United Brethren congregation, it now is home to persons of diverse denominational backgrounds.

Though many persons in the congregation consider themselves to be politically and fiscally conservative, it is not a theologically conservative church. Though this comes as a surprise to many who think they know the church well, the congregation has a zest for learning and for the subtleties and complexities of theological thought. Many of the long term members who moved into the community just after World War II made their living in the area factories or in the trades. Good livings were earned and families were raised. The children of these persons, kids of the babyboom generation, are for the most part white collar workers–accountants, doctors, engineers, teachers, etc. The parents worked hard, instilled a value for education in

their children even though they were not able to obtain similar education themselves. Younger members also demonstrate an appreciation for learning. Combine this enthusiasm for learning with genuine desire to grow spiritually and you discover persons ready to engage in serious reflection about God, about themselves, and about the relationship between themselves, God, and the world. Although I have experienced this thirst for knowledge, understanding, and growth in several forums, nowhere has it been more apparent than in the *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study* classes, an intensive course with the goal of "growing disciples," helping each member discern her or his gifts for ministry.

As soon as *Disciple* was introduced to the church the first class was fully enrolled. The oldest member was seventy-six years old at the time, the youngest twenty. Most of the class fell into the thirty-five to forty-six year age range. The class was marvelous. From the first session the discussion was lively and inquisitive. A few members had studied the Bible fairly extensively prior to this course; others had read very little, most had read selectively. Each subsequent course has reflected this same enthusiasm, curiosity, and similar levels of familiarity with the text. Since *Disciple* is a thirty-four week, intensive study which covers eighty per cent of the Bible, many students are reading portions for the first time or are giving deeper consideration to texts they previously tended to ignore.

Each time I have taught this study, the questions of theodicy inevitably surfaced within two weeks of the beginning of the course. I have been leading Bible studies for many years and teaching *Disciple* for four years, and never have I been the first one to mention these issues. As each class has attempted to face theodicy I have discovered that persons are responsive to a mini-lecture regarding the trilemma theism inherently imposes (God is all-powerful, God is all good, evil exists). The trilemma appears to give us a common handle, a touchstone to return to each time the questions arise. Outraged questions concerning God's power and the abuse thereof, heartfelt concerns about God's commitment to what persons feel is genuine goodness, bewildered responses to vengeful evil the text often attributes to God are some of the reactions to certain portions of the biblical text. In each class, persons, without prodding, have continually questioned God's culpability in "the Fall" story, God's arbitrary preference for one offering over another in the story of Cain and Abel, and they are quick to point out (often with confused amazement) that God seems to regret flooding the earth and places the bow in the sky to remind *God* of the covenant. Not one class has failed to ask how God could kill all those innocent Egyptian babies or why God kept hardening Pharaoh's heart, causing more suffering with each episode. Throughout the study, especially the study of the Old Testament, queries such as these continue. Often, the questions are prefaced

by a comment like, "I feel sacrilegious asking this, but I've always wondered..." or "you know, I was raised to believe God is all knowing and powerful, but [long pause]...but I just can't love a God who would do these things..."

Typically, such a "confession" is followed by murmurs of understanding and similar "confessions." Stories of personal loss and pain often follow and we talk about God's activity in those times, what we believe God does, and what we believe God does not do. Phrases like "will of God," and "free will," appear in the conversation. Soon we find ourselves talking about what freedom is and isn't, we find ourselves talking about power, we talk about the numbing evil in our society, we talk about fear versus worship, we talk about incarnation. We begin to make connections between what we have been taught about God and how we live our lives. Due to these discussions, and others like them throughout my ministry, I am convinced that how one settles these questions is crucial to how one lives one's life. Created in the image of God we become what we worship. Our image, our concept of God, not only determines how we respond to life's exigencies, but also our comportment. We will serve that which we worship.

As indicated in the pervious section these discussions and experiences are not limited to Eastmont United Methodist Church. I have experienced similar discussions somewhere in the midst of each congregation I have

known. I believe people struggle with these questions, too often silently, as they attempt to make meaning of their life experiences. "Where is God in our midst?" "What is God doing, how does God act?" "What is the relationship between God, humanity, and the creation?" "Is God genuinely good as 'good' is typically defined, connoted, and experienced?" "Why does God let evil happen? Can't God stop it? If God can stop it, why doesn't God? And if God can't stop it is God weak and ineffectual?" "Am I wrong to think this way, is it 'bad' to ask these questions of God and my religion?" My experience is that these are not just Eastmont United Methodist Church Bible study questions, these questions are widespread–they concern the very "stuff" of a person's existence. Many people are asking them, directly or indirectly, and many more just need to be told it is okay to ask, then their voices will join the chorus of the 'doubting' faithful.

From Socrates to Spielberg, this chorus is as ancient as it is contemporary, embracing the psalmist, Job, and Jesus as well as Elie Weisel, Woody Allen, and novelist Toni Morrison. Whether stated explicitly or implied the issues of theodicy are universally pondered and examined. One needs only to live life a little while before the questions of justice, evil, and goodness occur to one's mind. These questions come quickly to the forefront as children learn to play together, readily noting what is fair and what is not, innately responding to what they sense as good, what they sense as bad. At

all stages and ages of our communal history and of our individual lives we are a part of this struggle.

Life comes with its lessons. For many of us these lessons include teachings about God; the tradition teaches us as do our own perceptions or intuitions. Some may not learn of God or may reject those teachings yet still perceive a certain order to life itself and still live with expectations within certain boundaries. When we experience that which knocks the breath out of us our learnings, perceptions, expectations, and beliefs are shaken too. When such tragedy occurs persons who hold to particular belief systems seek answers within those systems. Sometimes the systems are discovered to be lacking. It is at these times that the questions I have been discussing become more than theological or biblical curiosity. Life experiences give way to the pondering of the heart.

Eastmont Church is no different. Persons have been through much pain and suffering and I have listened to the whispers, screams, and pondering of many hearts. Questions have been asked: by a family when a loved one died following a devastating struggle with AIDS, by teens when a classmate jumped to his death, from a woman whose husband abused her, by numerous victims of cancer and their families, by a young mother who felt responsible for her second child's death, so then aborted her third pregnancy, by a mother still grieving the accidental death of her son, by concerned folks

when a friend was the victim of hatred and persecution by a fundamentalist "Christian" group, by a woman who was raped, by a man who had been taught only of God's wrath, by persons who cannot reconcile the monumental evil this century has seen with what they want to believe about God. This is not a comprehensive list, the questions come and come, sometimes veiled, sometimes subtly, sometimes ponderously, sometimes spat out like venom, often whispered.

The group of persons in the first *Disciple* class discussed above agreed to continue to meet together concentrating their study on the issues of theodicy. They had completed two years of intensive Bible study, *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study* and *Disciple II: Into the Word, Into the World,* and were eager to engage in further and more direct theological reflection. They brought their biblical knowledge, their faith, and the experiences of their own lives to the project. They represented the experiences named above and were committed to attempting to discern God's role in these and similar situations. In other words, they want to further study concepts of God. Questions raised in our previous study became questions for this project. These questions included: What is the nature of God's power and goodness? How do we explain and respond to the problem of evil in the world? What do my beliefs about God have to do with how I live

my life? How do others think on these issues? What part did culture play in the Bible stories, what role does it play in our belief systems today?

Eight to ten women and men, ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-eight, participated in this project. As springboards for reflection and discussion; we read short stories and viewed films that grapple with these issues. Not only was this an interesting and perhaps "easier" entree into the theological discussion, the existence of these "non-theological" theological movies and novels says something significant to the discussion itself. The classic struggle of good versus evil so prevalent in society's movies and literature reflects the universality of the issues raised by theodicy. Most often these artistic endeavors grow out of one person's quest to understand, to cope, to discover meaning. The artist connects to something within that is at once unique and universal. The uniqueness makes it art, the universality makes it life. The artist connects within then connects without–others are able to apprehend what is being said because it speaks to something within themselves.

As members of the group engaged the storylines of various films and stories they were in some way engaging their own stories and the stories of humanity itself. We used these stories to help work through the experiences of our own lives and to help us discern what we believe about humanity, about God, and about God's relationship with us and the rest of creation.

Eastmont is my current context for ministry and as such is a fertile ground for theological reflection on the issues raised by theodicy due to its zest for learning and spiritual growth as well as to its members experiences with pain and suffering. Essentially, however, I claim a larger context for this project. The context becomes wherever these questions are being asked and experienced, the context becomes every congregation endeavoring to live in the image of God, the context becomes wherever faith is seeking understanding, wherever knowledge is yearning for faith.

CHAPTER II:

THE "STUFF" OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

My companion on the highway is often music.[3] Planning a long trip by car recently, I made sure to include several cassette tapes as well as my maps and iced tea. As hours and miles went by, I listened to some of my favorite recordings, from "Sounds of Blackness" to Rod Stewart, from "Les Miserables" to "Crash Test Dummies." My children and I sang with Billy Joel as the beat was tapped on the steering wheel. Diverse music, yet as I drove and listened and hummed and pondered I was struck by its commonality. Each artist or group sang of life, of struggle, of joy, of loss, of love, of God. Common themes, the "stuff" of human existence. As the music played my thoughts turned to the congregation I serve, the lives of its members, the sick, recent funerals, counseling appointments, hopes,

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[3]When the written word is a provocative word the reader discovers immediate dialogue. The writer's thought brings forth learning and response within the reader. For months now I have been "in dialogue" with several of the authors responsible for the current literature concerning theodicy. In the following pages I am sharing a part of this dialogue as I integrate my survey of the current literature with my response and with my own constructive theological statement. I do this by summarizing various points of important discussions as I work toward my own conclusions.

disappointments, their faith, their doubts, the sermons yet to be preached. The mental meanderings of a pastor leaving for a week sure in the knowledge (the dread and the hope) that it will all be there when she gets back. The music in the background, never gone, always a part of the mental hum, now sings of creation and evil and hope. The lyrics recite events of the last forty years and I recall the song as one of my "theodicy songs." Billy Joel's refrain could be God's refrain in the theodicy I am claiming:

> We didn't start the fire. It was always burning since the world's been turning. We didn't start the fire. We didn't light it but we've tried to fight it. We didn't start the fire.

As I listened to these words I was again reminded of David Griffin's rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* and of Jon Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil.*[4]

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[4]David R. Griffin, "Creation Out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil," in Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 101ff; Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (New York: Harper, 1988).

CHAPTER III:

THE BIBLICAL IDEA OF CREATION

Levenson argues that the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo ascribes a false finality to God's act of creation, playing down if not ignoring the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos. The strength and resiliency of the forces counteracting creation are not given their due, the drama of God's exercise of power is lost, and a static and overly optimistic idea of creation evolves. According to Levenson, Griffin, and many others the correct translation of Genesis 1:1 is "When God began to create..."[5] Given this translation we can see from the text that the waters evidently pre-existed God's creating act. Also seemingly primordial are other beings to whom God proposes the creation of humanity. The text does not speak of the origins of God at all–there is no theogony in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson draws this to mean that God had no origin nor does God's mastery–God has always reigned supreme. Over against this supremacy however, is chaos, and it is evident that God's mastery is not complete. Thus, in creation God ordered chaos but

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[5]See footnote a, Genesis 1, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2.

did not eliminate it. As Inbody states in his discussion of Levenson, "Creation is the confinement of chaos not its elimination."[6] The world is inherently unsafe, not inherently safe. It is only the iniative and eternal vigilance of God that prevents cataclysm. Levenson points to the passages that claim survival of the tamed agent of chaos (the Sea, Leviathan, or whatever) as creating a too often over-looked and essential tension in the theology. On the one hand, God's unique power to defeat and subjugate the adversity and to establish order is unquestioned. On the other hand, the passages that point to survival of the defeated enemy raise the possibility that the defeat may be yet reversed. Levenson claims that in our time the Sea has burst out of its appointed place, Leviathan has slipped the hook, and the covenant that ensures has been dishonored. Of course this mythical language has its reality in humanity and history. Though his formulation is much more complex, essentially Levenson is claiming that God is doing the best God can over against the pre-existent chaos that still exists and that can slip over its ordered boundaries. God didn't start the fire but functions as the cosmic firefighter.

I want to stress the concept that chaos is not confined but does indeed slip over its ordered boundaries. God has not confined chaos nor has God

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[6]Tyron Inbody, Take the Even, Take the Odd, 1994, Unpublished Manuscript, Chapter 7, 4.

mastered chaos or creation. Our eyes should not casually glance over Levenson's claim that "YHWH's mastery is often fragile," indeed incomplete. Creation as initial act is still occurring, God is still in the process of ordering chaos. God is ordering that which God has created, establishing a benevolent and life-sustaining system as was God's will when God began to create. God as cosmic firefighter, God as vigilant parent, God as creator, redeemer, reconciler continues to rein in (or reign in) chaos even as chaos inundates. God continues to discover what it means to create. God is, to use David Blumenthal's metaphor, sailing into the wind, continually tacking, striving to confine chaos and to respond to the exigencies of a free creation.[7]

Perhaps faith in the face of evil is the dogged and stubborn belief that God is mastering, can master, and will finally master, creation. The protesting voice is the hounding of God, encouraging God in no uncertain terms to be the God of creation (though I argue for the voice of protest reminding God of God's goodness and self-giving power, not calling God into account as omnipotent). The faithful life is one lived in relationship with and to this God who is establishing a life-sustaining and benevolent order. It is the faith one has in the beloved, the faith that the deity indeed desires your

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[7]David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Know Press, 1993), 47.

good and the good of the relationship; it is also a mutual faithfulness. It is covenantal.[8]

With Levenson I believe God does not have all the power there is and that the powers which exist over against God are not demonic but chaotic. This is not a dualism, but it is a pluralism of powers, including creaturely power. Obviously, a pluralism of powers indicates the relational nature of all power. Power would not be power, however it is conceived, outside some relationship.

> Even the greatest possible power, even the power than which no greater can be conceived, could not by definition be the only power there is...Omnipotence in the *ex nihilo* sense of the term and the way in which it is used in classical theism is conceptual nonsense.[9]

If you are the only one with power what can it possibly mean to be powerful? Thus, since God created out of chaos, which indicates agents other than God, God does not possess all the power which exists. One agent's power only has meaning in relation to another agent's power; therefore, God's power is social and relational. Likewise, creaturely power, the power of the

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[8]This document includes a christological element throughout its discussion. What I have in mind is akin to Leonardo Boff's thought in *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978). Christic structure, as discussed by Boff, locates christology in the very being of God and does not restrict the topic as being simply a discussion of Jesus as the Christ.

[9]Inbody, Chapter 7, 24.

created entity, exists in a similar social and relational realm. This will be discussed from another perspective in another chapter.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann also underscores the relational life of God as he lifts out the "minority report" from the first testament witness.[10] Brueggemann maintains there is a tension unresolved and unresolvable not only within the Old Testament witness, but within God. In his articles on structure legitimation/embrace of pain Brueggemann convincingly argues that what is unique to Israel is its discernment of a move in God that is in tension with "common theology." The Old Testament is a statement of the "common theology" of other Near Eastern religions, but it also is a statement of the crisis in "common theology" due to Israel's discernment of God. In our terms, the god(s) of "common theology" was an "omnis" god, a god of sanctions. The Old Testament witnesses to this God but also to a second move in God. In the heart of God there is an enormous patience; a faithfulness, even in the face of disobedience; a resistance to the theological categories which conventionally give God self-definition.

What emerges is an incongruity–God is committed to a structure of sanctions, yet yearns for a relationship with the disobedient partner. Old

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[10]Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape of Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (January 1985): 28-46. "A Shape of Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (July 1985): 395-415.

Testament theology is not only about structure–legitimacy but about the embrace of pain as well. In the embrace of pain God suffers and repents, yearns for relationship. The embrace of pain is a minority voice in the Old Testament but a crucial one. It opens the Old Testament to the future, to the cross of the New Testament, to the holocaust and beyond. The embrace of pain by God and by Israel makes it clear that it is no longer to be placidly assumed that God has all the power and the covenant partner must merely submit. Pain speaks against legitimacy, questions it as perhaps illegitimate. In the embrace of pain passages we see the faithfulness of God, God's repentance, God's grief.

Brueggemann and Terence Fretheim have been extremely helpful to me as I come to accept the ambiguity of God and of creation. There is tension, ambiguity, and paradox. Indeed, Brueggemann claims that faith lies in the tension–tension is "the stuff" of faith. God is ambiguous in that God is always in the process of deciding how to be God–is God going to be like the other gods or be a holy God, "the Holy One in our midst"? Perhaps it is merely semantics, but I would state God is continually discovering how to be God over against and within the actualities of chaos and creation rather than deciding how to be God. For me, based upon study of several texts, God is not deciding how to be God but how best to be faithful to creation and to the covenant partner. Indeed, I argue that God will break the covenant in order

to be faithful to the covenant partner, for even when the people have been disobedient and according to covenant deserved God's wrath, God has repented of God's anger and has forgiven the people.[11]

Fretheim also points to several neglected metaphors for God claiming they need voice in the post-holocaust world. Based upon Old Testament passages he defines God according to the organismic model rather than the traditional monarchical model. From the organismic perspective, "a greater continuity, indeed intimacy, between God and world is discerned in the texts, in what might be termed a 'relationship of reciprocity.'"[12] Fretheim claims that God is internally related to the world and that God's relationship to the world is real and has integrity. His presupposition is "any relationship of integrity will entail a sharing of power"[13]and therefore God gives up the exercise of some power and some freedom for the sake of the relationship. This real reciprocity and interdependency between God and God's creation not only points to the nature of God's power but also to the nature of God's goodness.

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[11]Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[12]Ibid., 35.

[13]Ibid., 36.

Deriving from this understanding of creation out of chaos and the relational nature of God and God's creation, the next two sections of this document focus upon redefinitions of divine power and divine goodness respectively.

However, before engaging these discussions I first need to consider, in some detail, what is implied about the nature of creation if one accepts the model I have been discussing. Wendy Farley calls this nature tragic structure. "Something in the constitution of the world makes an ethical passion for piety, justice, truth, or compassion self-destructive. The world order itself is implicated as the origin of tragic suffering."[14] Tragic structure locates the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of suffering in the fragility of human freedom *and* in the conditions of existence. This inevitability is not predestination or strict determinism, which would absolve humans from responsibility, but human action takes place in an environment which is already tainted. "This tragic structure is not evil, but it makes suffering both possible and inevitable prior to any human action."[15] The conditions that make human life possible also make us subject to evil, or to what Farley calls radical suffering.

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[14]Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 25-26.

[15]Ibid., 31-32.

Radical suffering or evil cannot be eradicated due to the tragic structure of creation. However, evil can be redeemed through divine compassion when such compassion is joined by the human responses of resistance and compassion. Divine power is relational power, interactive power. It cannot determine a response to itself or to evil due to the creature's freedom. "Compassion symbolizes the characteristic mode of relationship between God and evil. But as interactive power, it cannot determine a response to it; it can offer, but it must also be accepted. It can also be refused."[16] Creation's assets are also its curses. The freedom God granted creation (particularly human creatures), that which gives depth and meaning to a relationship with God, is also the very thing that allows humanity to act against divine compassion's power. The created world, due to its freedom, can act over against itself, not toward fulfillment but toward its own destruction. "The tragic structure of finitude, the fragility of freedom, the suprapersonal efficacy of history stand over against God as expressions of that which most fundamentally resists and rejects God."[17] God as creator is indicted, responsible for the existence of evil in the world. Evil exists, not created intentionally, but as an inevitability, due to finitude and freedom.

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[16]Ibid., 112.

[17]Ibid., 125.

It seems that the very things that give life its vitality and verve are the very things that give evil its potential, possibility, and probability. Imagine life without finitude and freedom. Without the "threat" of death, life would have no zest; without freedom there would be no meaning. Creation is ambiguous.

In James Poling's discussion of a fully relational God he cites Bernard Loomer's understanding of God's ambiguity in relation to the ambiguity of creation.

> This image of a fully relational God would be ambiguous in terms of good and evil because the creation itself is ambiguous. Loomer suggests that "an ambiguous God is of greater stature than an unambiguous deity" because such a God includes the full reality of creation as a part of the ultimate reality. A relational God is one who is fully interdependent with the ambiguities of human life.[18]

Intellectually, I accept this concept of God. It makes sense. Sometimes I wonder if my assent is purely intellectual, that is, conceptually this is the most acceptable definition of God and God's power given the realities of life as I have experienced them. But does it preach? Is this God more than a concept, more than a definition? Is this God worthy of worship? Can I, as pastor, as friend, as mother, in truth and with integrity, offer this God to those who are experiencing radical suffering?

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[18]James Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 174.

There are days when it does not seem like enough. Evil, corporate and personal, seems too overwhelming, too overpowering. On these days it seems as if evil has won. The knowledge that God is with me, with us, that God suffers with me, with us, that God sustains us is certainly comforting. But tomorrow someone else will die a brutal death, and survivors of the Holocaust are still tormented in their memories and dreams. It should be enough to know, as Poling states it, that everything I am, without exclusion, is received into God's experience.[19] But what difference does this make? Will there be less evil in the world tomorrow because God received my pain today? God sympathetically claiming, "I feel your pain," falls short of being a theodicy with integrity. As the Creator in relationship with and to the world God must be actively involved with the events of the world as they occur not only responding passively to them with a cheer or with a heavy heart after they occur. I agree with Loomer that a relational God is interdependent with the ambiguities of human life. The interplay does not stop with the commencement of suffering; God suffers with us and moves in and through the suffering with us toward the best possible good.[20]

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[19]Ibid., 182.

[20]Once again christological images surface. Poling comments, "In Jesus I see a God who can embrace the full ambiguity of good and evil without losing integrity" (182). Jesus does not lose integrity because not only is he able to *embrace* the full ambiguity of good and evil, he *experiences* these ambiguities and they become the stuff of his ministry. In the negotiation with the

It is not Farley's or Poling's discussion of ambiguity that bothers me; as I embrace a redefinition of God's power I cannot avoid ambiguity, nor should I want to. Ambiguity and creation go hand in hand. It is a sense of impotence that distresses me. Is Farley's God of divine compassion or Poling's God of resilience and hope enough for the child who drowns at the wet hands of his mother because he was on her nerves, enough for the Holocaust survivor haunted by images of her murdered mother's hair adorning someone's rug?

Evil cannot be reconciled, it can only be fought. I want a world where teenagers do not leap from buildings, where children are not abused, where no one is hated due to the color of her skin or his religion. I think it is not to be. Yet evil is increased incrementally each time someone gives up the struggle–perhaps apathy and complacency are evil's companions.

Sometimes I think humanity turns toward deity, Christians toward God through Christ because, as the old "Poison" song says, we need "something to believe in." I often recall the scene in Martin Scorsese's movie version of *The Last Temptation of Christ* where Paul tells the uncrucified

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Syrophoenician woman, Mark 7:24-30, Jesus blinks first. He backs away from his original stance, changes his mind, and not only sympathizes with the woman but heals her daughter. This is not to say that God is able to heal every suffering but it does point toward a God and toward a humanity able to do more than sympathize.

Jesus that he proclaims Jesus crucified and risen not because it is the truth but because the people *need* to believe it. So that we do not give up, so that we can make it through the ambiguities of life, so that we can cope with the vagaries of existence, so that we have a Power to thank when we know joy and to comfort us when we know sorrow, we believe in that which we can neither grasp nor understand. Yet we insist on constructing the mystery in a way that is accessible and defensible.

Farley's God and Poling's is accessible and somewhat defensible, classical theism's God is neither. However, I reject the former's impotence and the latter's omnipotence. There is another way to speak of power.

CHAPTER IV:

DIVINE POWER REDEFINED

Andrew Park writes *The Wounded Heart of God* to give central place to the pain, the *han*, of the victims of sin.[21] This is over against the traditional doctrine of the church which concentrates its doctrine of sin on the sinner. Within this traditional doctrine one finds the classical notions of "the fall," free will, the meanings of omnipotence and omnibenevolence, and the definition of evil. Park believes it unchristian to overlook the pain of the victims of sin and also believes this pain, *han*, is an important factor in human evil and in the wounded heart of God. Indeed, *han* is the "point of contact between Jesus Christ and suffering humanity and between Jesus Christ and God."[22] For Park it is the experience of *han* in life and in the life of Jesus Christ which calls into question the traditional notions of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. It is only through the *han*-ridden life of Jesus that these notions make sense or have meaning. Park is

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[21]Andrew Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

[22]Ibid., 126.

not out to formulate a theodicy but to encourage the salvation of God, the healing of God's heart through human participation in "the life of Jesus Christ and his historical mission."[23] Through such participation the *han* of the oppressed is dissolved and the sin of the oppressors is eliminated; therefore, the purpose of Creation and Incarnation is actualized and God's wounded heart is healed. This is fascinating if taken at face value for this is to say that God's salvation and subsequently ours depends upon humanity! A scary thought but also one which says something over against the traditional ideas of God's omnipotence and "otherness." God's power is relational and the relationship is mutual and reciprocal. This is also a christological definition of God's power and God's relationality; I shall pursue this further in my own christological understandings especially in light of Christine Smith's critique of sacrificial theology.[24]

Smith strongly resists (as do I) any idea which would insist that "Jesus' death on a cross or any death on a cross, breaks the power of sin, transforms human conditions, or shatters evil."[25] I know too many persons who have stayed in abusive situations because suffering is the "Christian

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[23]Ibid., 127.

[24]Christine M. Smith, *Preaching As Weeping, Confession, and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

[25]Ibid., 158.

thing to do." Park makes me uncomfortable with his suggestion that we know the reality of God *only* in the midst of experiencing *han* in the world. While he does not say we must personally experience *han* to know God, it is not a great leap of logic to derive this if one trying to make the best out of a *han*-ridden situation.

It is the experience of *han,* the pain victims of oppression have experienced, which concerns Smith. Hers is not a book about preaching, nor is it a theodicy. Yet, as she has had to face the reality of radical evil she has had to face the dogma of her Christian tradition.[26] Not only has she named evil a reality, she has named that reality oppression. The book deals with various forms of this evil but does not discuss its origins or the nature of God in light of evil's reality. While I find her discussion of atonement refreshing and captivating and discovered many of the chapters to be helpful in my life and pastoral care, the book overall contributes little to my ongoing debate with classical theodicy.[27]

Indeed, while much of the current literature offered in the theodicy debate argues with classical theism, very few arguments offer a theodicy.

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[26]Ibid., 3.

[27]Later in this document I shall return to Smith's atonement discussion as I focus upon christology and it implications for my theodicy. While embracing a kenosis theology, I too, reject any atonement theory which in practice leads to self–sacrifice or self–abnegation.

The burgeoning material in this area focuses, for the most part, upon one specific issue–the abuse of power. Actually, it seems almost trendy to address the political dimensions of the problem of suffering. While I believe abuse of power certainly contributes to suffering I hesitate to state that all suffering stems from abuse. While I resonate with the pain expressed by a victim of abuse due to my own experience and while I am drawn to and fascinated by Blumenthal's protest in the face of an abusing God, I am made uneasy by what sometimes appears to be an "embrace" of victimization. However, my reaction to this is more feeling than thought, more intuitive sense than rational claim. The current need to hop on the victimization bandwagon at times seems to cheapen the experience of the survivors of abuse.[28]

The reading we did in our course of study, biblical exegesis, my own experience, and the experiences of others call into question orthodox Christianity as it is traditionally presented. My intellectual understanding of the tradition and my experience within it suggest that theism's crux is

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[28]Personally and pastorally I prefer the term "survivor" over "victim." Certainly it is necessary to recognize and name one's experiences as victim. However, it is crucial to claim one's rights as survivor. Language is important. Anyone able to speak of his or her abuse, anyone able to remember it, anyone who has lived through it is a survivor. For me, using the term "victim" to describe myself in light of abusive experiences only gives power once again to my abusers.

God's omnipotence. The other components of theodicy's trilemma, omnibenevolence and the existence of evil, are bent and twisted to fit the claim of omnipotence as it is classically defined–God having all the power there is. Based upon my rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*, my understanding of relational power, an acceptance of the Old Testament "minority report," an incarnational theology, and reasons autobiographical, I reject the traditional definition of God's power as unilateral power, accept the reality of evil, and reassert God's goodness. When one considers the manifold evil, on both a micro and macro level, which has been experienced in this century alone, the claim that evil is only apparent evil cannot be justified. Given this real evil a god who has power to intervene but chooses not to could be a tyrant but could not be God as God is revealed in the prevailing themes of the Old and New Testaments and as known in the Trinity. Certainly God has genuine power, but it is power which defies the limits of power traditionally defined. I agree with Bernard Loomer's value theory regarding "size"–a god of unilateral power is a small idol, not large enough to merit devotion and faith.[29]

Assuming the classical trilemma in theodicy–the incongruity of simultaneously holding to God's perfect goodness, God's perfect power, and the existence of genuine evil–there are some theologians who advocate

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[29]Bernard Loomer, "The Size of God," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (January and May 1987): 20-51.

redefining God's power as a means of avoiding the incongruity. Traditionally, it is common to redefine evil to mean apparent evil. But in this time "between holocausts" it is difficult to claim that there is no genuine evil due to the magnitude of evil in our world. It is also possible to endeavor to redefine divine goodness (see Belden Lane, Frederick Sontag, John Roth, W. Robert McClelland and others discussed below), but some, including this writer, refuse to do this because a God who is not all-good is not God and is not worthy of worship. But what does it mean to redefine the power of God?

It does not mean that God is not powerful, but that God does not have all the power there is. It is an attempt to reconceive the concept of omnipotence as it is found in classical theism by defining God's power as limited. This concept of the limitation of God's power aims to exonerate God from indictability for evil by redefining power in relation to other power. Thus this redefinition of power is related to the free-will defense in that the latter also depends upon the reality (at least provisionally) of other genuine power along side of God. In my studies I have seen at least two forms of the concept of the limitation on God's power: (1) God's power self-limited as discussed by John Hick, Harold Kushner and others, and (2) the idea of ontological limitation as presented by Griffin and other process thinkers.

Hick's eschatological theodicy is based upon the thought of Irenaeus over against Augustinian thought, which is the basis for traditional Western

theism.[30] Irenaeus, however, not only predates Augustine but also speaks to us from an earlier and more ecumenical phase of Christian thought. Though he did not develop a comprehensive theodicy his thought does contain an approach to the problem of evil which contrasts with the Augustinian theodicy. Briefly this can be summarized in the following points: Instead of the doctrine that humanity was created finitely perfect and then unfathomably destroyed its own perfect state, falling into sin, Irenaeus claims that the human was created as an immature, imperfect creature who was meant to experience moral development and growth, ultimately being brought to the perfection intended by God. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented as in the tradition as an adult crime, catastrophic, ripe with malice and "pregnant with perpetual guilt,"[31] completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus depicts it as something that happened in the childhood of the species, an understandable slip due to immaturity and weakness. Instead of the Augustinian view of life's difficulties as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world, with its mingling of evil and good, as the divinely chosen environment for humanity's development toward the perfection that is God's good purpose for it.

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[30]John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978).

[31]Ibid., 215.

Irenaeus distinguishes between the image of God and the likeness of God in humanity. The image represents the human's nature as an intelligent creature capable of fellowship with his/her creator; the likeness represents the human's final perfecting by the Holy Spirit. Though Hick questions this exegetically, he interprets it to mean that the image is the bestowal of personal being endowed with moral freedom and responsibility. However, though this finite personal being is created capable of personal relationship with its Maker, it is only potentially the perfected being God is seeking to produce. The "likeness" is the culmination of this process of perfecting–a process of growth and development in God's continuing providence.

According to Hick the Irenaean or eschatological approach to evil was dormant until picked up by Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century. Though it does not appear that he was influenced by Irenaeus he carries many of the same themes, including the insight that humankind was not created ready-made and perfect *ab initio*, but with the potential to become the perfected being intended by God. If it is true that we have been created so that our perfection lies in the future rather than the past, our present imperfection, immaturity, belongs to our God-given nature. Imperfection and redemption both have a place in the divine plan, the latter presupposing the former. God created us at a distance from God, ontologically and

existentially, precisely so that we may come freely to God, drawn by redeeming grace. God has willed to create a world in which it is better for God to permit sin and evil than to not permit them. In this largely anthropocentric view, the world exists to be an environment for the human's life, and its trials are integral to its fitness as a place for soul-making. This theodicy looks to the future rather than to the past–it is eschatological, finding the justification for the existence of evil in an ultimate good which God is bringing out of the temporal process. God does not will genuine evil. God did not create evil as evil, it is only evil in that it stands in the way of God-consciousness. Ultimately there is no evil at all for it has finally, eschatologically served the purpose of God. God does not will genuine evil–it is inevitable in a world of genuine freedom.

Inherent in this framework, as in any, is a value-judgment. Hick assumes that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in God's eyes which justifies even the long travail, trial and tribulation of the soul-making process. For Hick the question to ask is not whether this is the most pleasant and convenient environment or whether it is the one that an all-powerful and loving being would create for its pets but rather "Is this the kind of world that God might make as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free

insights and responses, into 'children of God'?"[32] Hick answers with an unqualified, "Yes!"

He believes that in order to be a person, exercising some degree of genuine freedom, the creature must be created not in the immediate presence of the divine but at an epistemic distance from God. For though God's intention is to create perfect finite beings in relationship with God,

> it is logically impossible for humans to be created already in this perfect state, because in its spiritual aspect it involves coming freely to an uncoerced consciousness of God from a situation of epistemic distance, and in its moral aspect, freely choosing the good in preference to evil.[33]

However, Hick seeks to define this freedom as being a limited creativity. God has endowed the human creature with a genuine though limited autonomy, but in this endowment God also limits God's own power so that the human's freedom is "genuine."

This power given to the human creature is genuine in that the power is the power to decide freely and to effect and affect the world. God rarely exercises God's omnipotent power as God is bound by God's own self-limitation.

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[32]Ibid., 257.

[33]John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy," in Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 48.

In claiming that human free will is genuine Hick intends to release God from unilateral responsibility for everything that happens within the creation. However, the concept that God is self-limited presupposes that God was, is, and will be the only power there is in the creation. God gives humanity a share in God's power as a gift. But if God has self-limited God's power through intentionally sharing it with the human creature, can not this be modified or withdrawn whenever God might choose? And if it can be modified or revoked is the power given to the creature genuine? I think not. I have a friend who joked that she gave her son a Nintendo game system as a gift so that she can take it away. This is a mother who uses her parental omnipotence. Is Hick's God any different? If God wishes, God can, for any reason, reassert divine omnipotence. The "gift" of freedom can be withdrawn.

This is one of the reasons I struggle with Hick's concept of divine self-limitation. If God will eventually reassert God's omnipotence and finally consummate the creation, is human freedom just a figment of God's imagination? That is, does God pretend we have genuine freedom, knowing full well that at any point this can be suspended? And even if this freedom is genuine in some sense, what does it mean to the goodness of God if freedom only exists so that God can have the satisfaction of knowing that some of the human creatures responded freely to this creator who not only gave them freedom but who made them jump through hoops of moral and natural evil in

the process? I also find lacking the implication that God's omnipotence will be reasserted eschatologically so that all will be saved. Again this implies that human freedom is not genuine and begs at least two questions: God, what are you waiting for? and can unconscionable evil truly be redeemed even eschatologically?

The above questions come from an unclear understanding of what it means to say that the divine will is self-limited. However, the following comments grow out of a dissatisfaction with Hick's futuristic eschatology. Even given the overwhelming suffering in the world Hick insists that in the glorious kingdom to come it will all be worth it. I pray for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven; Hick's eschatology is definitely "located" in heaven. Perhaps in Hick's eyes, perhaps in the eyes of Hick's God, all the travail in the world may be justified in the end. But can we say this as we look into the eyes of a burning child? Is evil justified in the stinging eyes of a citizen of Hiroshima as she watches her skin erode from radiation or in the weeping eyes of a parent whose daughter was shot down randomly by a group of teens out for some kicks? A purely futuristic eschatology offers too little, too late. Eschatological hope in the face of a *han*-ridden world or a *han*-ridden life can feel like no hope at all. Victims of "the vale of soul-making"–this vale of tears, this life-long walk through the valley of the shadow of death–deserve more than a refrain of "All's well that ends well."

In the reformulation of divine power, the alternative to the concept of divine self-limitation is the concept of ontological limitation. This concept agrees with my belief that self-limitation is not genuine limitation. The power God gives creatures can be modified or revoked at any time since it is merely given by an omnipotent God. The process view, this concept of ontological limitation, maintains that there is a necessary, inherent, or essential limitation on the divine power, so that God as creator cannot be the *unilateral* cause of anything that occurs in the world. The assumption is that God is not the only actuality in the world but that there are also non-divine actualities in any world–God and some world are co-eternal. These actualities are not demonic but chaotic. God is hovering over the waters of chaos, calling forth what good God can.

According to David Griffin, as we saw earlier, God did not create *ex nihilo,* but achieved the creation of order out of pre-existing chaos. If God in creating the world worked with some pre-existent actualities, these actualities could well have some power of their own with which they could partially foil the divine will. Also there might be some eternal, uncreated, necessary principles about the way these actualities can be ordered which limit the kinds of situations that are actually possible. Griffin refutes the idea of omnipotence in classical theism, and, therefore, dissolves the problem of evil by claiming that there has always been a plurality of actualities

having some power of their own.[34] This power is the power to determine themselves (partially) and the power to influence others. Power is relational. It makes no sense to think of omnipotent power as all the power there is, for then what could power mean? This "power" could not be exercised over against any other genuine power and so could not in itself *be* genuine power.

Following the preface to *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Levenson quotes Hans Jonas, "Power as such is a relational concept and requires relation."[35] For God to be powerful in any genuine way another genuine power is required. In the process view God is omnipotent in the only way that omnipotence can have any meaning given the proper metaphysics– omnipotence cannot mean having all the power there is, it can only mean having all the power that any one entity could conceivably have consistent with there being other entities who as such also have some power. God's omnipotent power is better referred to as maximal power or unsurpassable power. The power of the non-divine actualities is inherent to them and, therefore, cannot be controlled by God. We have inherent power in relation to God. Our self-determining activity, and its influence on others, cannot be totally controlled by God. God can only persuade what we become and how we affect others.

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[34]Griffin, 105.

[35]Levenson, epigraph

God creates the world and redeems the world but not unilaterally. God first presents what process theology calls the "initial aim," experiences the wealth of the experience of each occasion, saves what is good out of that actuality, and then presents what is the best possible experience in the next occasion thereby initiating the lure of the next occasion. In other words, God wills the best possible good out of every situation but cannot unilaterally cause this to happen due to the causal power of the past, the range of possibilities, and moreover, due to the freedom of the occasion to decide what to actualize in the moment of concrete decision. Simply put, this is how I have come to understand God's grace and my response: In any given situation, God's grace responds for the greater good, but I also am free in the moment of decision to decide against responding positively toward God's grace.

As always willing the best possible in every situation God is totally good. However, this does not mean that it is God's will only to avoid evil. The claim is that God can avoid evil only by avoiding greater good, and since the quest for greater good is why and how God creates, there is an inevitability of evil.

In this world of natural law there is no rigid determinism (recall Farley's tragic structure argument). We live in a world of change, of novelty, and freedom–a world of chance. Some suffering and some happiness exist as

purely contingent facts of chance–it is good or bad luck–a part of the contingent scheme of things.

I am discovering that though I do not speak Whiteheadian or Hartshornian language I think in process terms. When I can decipher the language and the metaphysics I find a kinship with process thought. I find myself thinking, "Aha, that's what I've been trying to say! Now let's try to find a clear way to say it." My language is more akin to what we find in Brueggemann, Fretheim, Jurgen Moltmann, and John Macquarrie. Essentially, I will consider any theology that "kills the God of classical theism," that is, any theology which contains an organismic model of God over against a monarchical model. Process is compelling because its formulation contains genuine evil (in other words, there is that in the world that the world would have been better without), genuine goodness (intrinsic good is God's goal), and genuine omnipotence (power must be relational in order to be genuine [meaningful] power).

If power is defined as dominating power, "omnipotent power"–power that demands obedience, power that threatens the creatures with destruction if they do not obey–then a powerful God is not worthy of our worship. I think of David Blumenthal's correspondent, Diane, a victim of child abuse. In her view and mine not only is an omnipotent god unworthy of worship, this god is unworthy of any relationship whatsoever. "God, omnipotent and uncaring, is

someone whom I would never wish to encounter again. I would stay as far away from Him as possible, forever. He would not be deserving of my company, comfort, praise, and love."[36] Sadly, Diane is also accurate when she says the past cannot be changed. Perhaps there can be comfort and healing, but whatever God does from this point forward cannot change the evil that occurred.

Part of the problem in the world is that too many persons worship raw, unilateral, "absolute" power. Where one's treasure is, there is one's heart as well–we become what we worship. I find it interesting and tragic that several wives of husbands who were raised in strict, traditional, "Almighty God" households have ended up in my office despairing over their powerful and abusive husbands. Unilateral power corrupts; we are what we worship.

The power of God is relational power, the power to will goodness and to move toward the fulfillment of goodness. "The true good is an emergent from deeply mutual relationships."[37] Further, power as we experience it in and from God is so deeply mutual that mutuality is part of its definition.

> Power is the capacity to sustain a mutually internal relationship. This is a relationship of mutually influencing and

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[36]Blumenthal, Diane's letter (January 30, 1990), 205.

[37]Loomer, 21.

> being influenced, of mutually giving and receiving, of mutually making claims and permitting others to make their claims.[38]

This is a God who is involved in the world, interdependent with the world. This is a God who calls creation to be in relationship, with God and within itself. This is a God who "grows" creation and the human members of it by calling us forth from our small, narrow, individualized, unilateral understanding of power to a larger, fuller, more expansive, relational power. The world of one who can be in mutual relationship with another without losing identity or freedom is "larger" than the world of one who fears relationship.[39] This is true of us and it is true of God. "The god of unilateral power is not a tribal deity. On the contrary. It is a universal god. But it is a demonic god, an idol which is not large enough to merit our faith and devotion."[40]

The God of relational power is not a weak, sweet, sentimental God but a Deity who is steadfast and faithful in the way it relates to its creation. The

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[38]Ibid., 23.

[39]Ibid., 21.

[40]Ibid., 29.

power of God is that which creates, reconciles, and consummates through ongoing self-giving and mutuality–this is the God who brings forth worship and service. This is the God that I, as person and pastor, can offer, proclaim, serve, and worship.

CHAPTER V:

DIVINE GOODNESS REDEFINED

Assuming the classical trilemma in theodicy–the incongruity of simultaneously holding to God's perfect goodness, God's perfect power, and the existence of genuine evil–there are some theologians who advocate redefining God's goodness as a means of avoiding the incongruity. Traditionally, as we have seen, it is common to redefine evil to mean apparent evil. But in this time "between holocausts" it is difficult to claim that there is no genuine evil due to the magnitude of evil in our world. It is, as we saw, possible to redefine divine omnipotence, but some refuse to do this as, for them, a god who is not all-powerful is not God. But what does it mean to redefine the goodness of God?

It does not mean that God is not good or that God is essentially evil. It does mean, however, that God is not perfectly good in that God's being includes traits or actions that can be called evil. God is an ambiguous, ambivalent God whose goodness includes characteristics we would normally classify as negative, such as wrath, arbitrariness, indifference, vengeance, hatred, irrationality, destruction, and abuse. This God is infinite and so

unknowable that our language about goodness cannot apply to God in the same way that it does to finite, knowable beings. To say that God is all good is meaningless since we cannot know what omnibenevolence would do.

It seems clear to me that if we cannot apply our language to an understanding of God's goodness we should not be able to apply it to God's omnipotence either. Yet the theologians who are making these language claims do not seem to apply the same standards to their understanding of God's omnipotence. If we cannot, do not, know what infinite goodness would be, we cannot, do not know what infinite power would be either. The claim that God's goodness includes a set of moral qualities with negative meanings is also lacking. I am reminded of the C. S. Lewis comment to the effect that if God means something entirely different than we do by the concept "good" then why relate?[41] There must be some affinity between God's concept of good and ours. Obviously, the rejection of God's goodness is not my solution to the question at hand, but before proceeding with further questions and criticism let us look briefly at the work of some who do offer this as solution.

We have met the enemy and it is God–so claims W. Robert McClelland. He speaks of God as "our loving enemy."[42] Not only does he mean that we

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[41]C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain (New York:* Macmillan, 1962), 37.

[42]Inbody, Chapter 5, 13.

sometimes experience God in this way but that God *is* the enemy. God stands behind our suffering, assigning our crosses. God hounds and haunts us until we realize that we can not have life on our own terms. God is the perturbator, the disturber of our contentment and of our lives. This God is not malevolent but loving, seeking to convey to us the truth that is different than what we want it to be. God comes to us as enemy to transform us, to cause us to grow in grace. This cruel grace [my term] brings us into relationship. Through the crucifixions and resurrections God bestows, God shows God's self to us as grace. The resurrection does not deny life's crucifixions but assures us that the crucifixions have God's approval and therefore cannot destroy us. This notion of a final good makes it clear that McClelland is not really proposing a total reconception of the goodness of God. Ultimately, all is good since it serves the final good and is caused by the omnipotent God. McClelland holds fast to God's power–everything that happens in life is of God.

I must ask–what kind of God uses raw power to goad, cajole, whip her/his children into relationship? The idea that ultimately it is good means nothing when one is being whipped. McClelland states that the resurrection assures us that life's crucifixions cannot destroy us. Try to tell this to someone who has been destroyed–eschatological hope of ultimate goodness

out there somewhere offers little comfort in the torturous reality of the here and now.

The God of Belden Lane is a game player but "he" is no fun at all from my perspective.[43] This is not a God of laughter and whimsical serendipity but a God of tough love who plays rough for love's sake. Though Lane begins with a God who like a lover teases and seduces, playing hard to get in a playful game of hide and seek which is really meant to draw the loved one in, he shifts to a more menacing understanding of God. God plays rough. This play is risky, menacing, sometimes assuming the very aspect of evil. Lane claims that God exhibits this divine humor in order to bring forth relationship, delighting in the same boldness on our part which works toward establishing intimacy. This is not merely how we experience God but how God is in God's nature.

Need I say that I find this concept of God to be unconscionable? I remember the first time I encountered this material, my response was visceral. While open to new interpretations of what it means to say God is good, even as one who does not reject ambiguity within God and creation, I was outraged and offended by Lane's picture of not only an abusive God but

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[43]Belden Lane, "A Hidden and Playful God," *Christian Century* (September 30, 1987): 812-13; "God Plays Rough for Love's Sake," *Christian Century* (October 14, 1987): 879-81; "Fierce Landscapes and the Indifference of God," *Christian Century* (October 11, 1989): 907-10.

of God delighting in the abuse. This is not humor but horror; it is a perversion of God's relational love. If Lane's god develops relationship through menacing methods it would be a relationship of fear not integrity. Lane's claim brings forth images of child and spouse abuse–"I only beat ya, `cause I love ya." There is nothing playful or humorous or loving in a god who throws "his" weight around, playing menacing games before breaking into merciless laughter. This elicits relationship only if one is seeking a relationship ruled by fear and quaking submission.

As Lane moves into understanding God's love through the motif of indifference I become less critical. Though I do not accept the austere, distant, sovereign images there is a sense in which I am drawn to a kind of indifference in God's nature. I do not believe that God is equally involved in every life in every moment. Though God is related to the world, God is not impinging upon every decision. God is indifferent as to whether I remember everything on my grocery list, and to think that God concerns God's self with this smacks of self-idolatry. Also, I recognize a paradoxical presence of God in the times that I realize how insignificant I am in the order of things. The grandeur of the mountains, the breathtaking beauty of a foggy morning, the vastness of the sea, the intricate design of a pomegranate or a spider's web, the sudden lurking green darkness of a threatening storm de-emphasize my importance, allowing me to empty myself, making room for God. This is akin

to Lane's notion of God's indifference which turns out to be another form of God's insistent love. Within God's indifference is ambiguity and paradox. There is also the slippery slope of proportionality. How indifferent is God "allowed" to be before I accuse God of being uncaring, uninvolved, too transcendent? Additionally, I suspect my comfort with an indifference within God says more about me, my experiences and intuitions, than it says about God.

Within the Godhead exists evil. Since Jim Garrison insists on retaining the traditional understanding of the power of God in his interpretation of evil in the world, he is forced to speak of the evil of God.[44] Humans do evil but so does God. There is a tension within the Godhead and humanity that produces evil. On scriptural and historical grounds Garrison rejects the God of traditional theism which identifies God as wholly and perfectly good. Garrison's God is a God of "darkness" as well as "light," a God who is savage as well as merciful.[45] Ultimately, God's will is benevolent and salvific, but there is a side of God which, with humanity, wills evil. This ambiguity is within God not only within our experience of God. God's inner

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[44]Jim Garrison, *The Darkness of God: Theology after Hiroshima* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

[45]One of the most complex issues in contemporary theodicy is the use of "light" and "dark" as image and metaphor. There is a history of biblical, historical, psychological, sociological, and racial connotations to these terms.

goodness includes the power and will to do evil, but since God's basic will is goodness God is able to integrate the intrinsic good and intrinsic evil into the highest good.

While I can accept and worship a bipolar God I reject and will not worship a God who is morally ambiguous. The God of scripture is dynamic and bipolar; there is indeed creative tension within this bipolarity, but there is not moral ambiguity.

Frederick Sontag strongly argues for God's complete power, but is willing to redefine God's goodness.[46] In speaking of God he uses words like freedom, will, might, awesome majesty, power, emotion–images that hold tightly to God's omnipotence. Omnipotence is an underlying assumption in all of Sontag's thought. Given this and his recognition of evil as real, he must then redefine God's goodness to include the intention of evil, chance, indifference, callousness. God's goodness created a cosmic game of Russian roulette where chance is the order of the day.

God has purposefully placed us in a situation of less than full advantage and subject to more waste and destruction than any reason can account for. God's design is not cost-effective. This demonstrates that we are dealing with a God who is capable of more harshness than some humans

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[46]Frederick Sontag, *The God of Evil: An Argument for the Existence of the Devil* (New York: Harper, 1970).

would use. Perhaps God will ultimately fulfill our faith in God's love, but perhaps not. The present does not indicate that this would be so. And no matter what the outcome no end could justify the means–there is just too much wanton destruction, too much evil, too much terror. But if any God can radically alter our broken situation it will be this God of wrath, might, power, and awesome majesty–the burden is taken off us for our situation in the world. This God can alter our situation if "he" so chooses. Like the Russian roulette game of life, trust in this God is a gamble.

Again, I disagree with Sontag's rejection of the doctrine of God's goodness rather than rejecting the doctrine of God's power. I just cannot understand this worship and devotion to raw and all-encompassing power. "The continued practice of this kind of power breeds an insensitivity to the presence of the other."[47] Unilateral power, practiced by God, creates a negative distance between God and creation and sets up God to become more and more insensitive to the creation.

Writing eloquently and convincingly, John Roth calls for a theodicy of protest.[48] He states that his approach underscores God's sovereignty but cannot affirm God's goodness. To do so would be to apologize for God, to

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[47]Loomer, 18.

[48]John Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," in Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 7-37.

exonerate God on grounds of weakness. "A protesting theodicy puts God on trial, and in that process the issue of God's wasteful complicity in evil takes center stage."[49] Even if God somehow works it all out for good there will still be too much waste left over. The slaughter-bench is too bloody to ever be fully cleansed. And yet it is the despair caused by this drenched slaughter-bench that brings forth protest.

Roth's article and response are poignant; however, his conclusions are unacceptable. Since he depends on God's omnipotence he cannot turn to any workable understanding of the repentance of God as found in the Old Testament. If God cannot or will not repent what good are the protests? Roth indicates that the protests bring forth positive and compassionate responses from humanity, yet not from God. How is it that the creatures are morally superior to the creator?

Clearly, Roth feels deep compassion for the suffering world; it is disheartening to observe that his God is not allowed the same compassion. He tries to stand on biblical witness, but he gives us no clue as to why he rejects the tradition's understanding of divine goodness. I wonder what Roth's response to Fretheim and Brueggemann would be. Without an understanding of God's repentance being in tension with God's power, there

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[49]Ibid., 10.

is no hope for God's future reconciling activity. Brueggemann calls for protest also, but it is a protest to God *and* of God. Roth's protests can only fall on deaf ears. Brueggemann's embrace of pain will not allow evil to be legitimated; Roth's position legitimates evil in the sense that God, the all-powerful one, furthers it unnecessarily.

Something within me, perhaps my grief for the world, is empathetic with Roth's theodicy. The slaughter-bench *is* too bloody, the stakes too high. Protest against evil, suffering, and injustice is not only understandable but mandatory. A protest theodicy calls God to accountability.

> God's responsibility is located in the fact that he [sic] is the one who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being. True, since we are thrown into history at our birth, we appear in social settings made by human hands, but ultimately those hands cannot account for themselves.[50]

Though I believe random chaos contributes to suffering in the world, much evil seems to stem from human volition. Is the creator God ultimately responsible for human evil? While working toward the best possible good God "permits" much violence. Once again this raises the question of proportionality. Is evil winning? Is my non-omnipotent God an impotent God? Roth comments he hears that God is love virtually every Sunday, that "God is light and in God no darkness at all." Roth claims he would be lying if

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[50]Ibid., 11.

he said he did not believe this; he would also be lying if he said he did. I understand and concur. With Roth I can sometimes claim, "My position copes between 'yes' and 'no'; God is love...but not enough. God is light...but not enough."[51] The grace of God limps, but also leaps. God is ambiguous. My experience of God is ambiguous. I am ambiguous.

Given David Blumenthal's rended heart in response to the evil and abuse in our time, his claim that God is indictable in light of this evil and abuse, and his choice not to sever his relationship with God, a theology of protest seems to be his only recourse. An entire chapter could be written in response to Blumenthal's *Facing the Abusing God,* which includes correspondence from Diane, a survivor of abuse, and from Wendy Farley. The book is grueling, mystifying, beautiful, horrible, resonant with some of my experience–"an excruciating joy."[52] Ultimately, however, I must reject his claim that God's action is sometimes evil, sometimes good. His is not merely an ambiguous god, but a pathologically schizophrenic god. In responding to Farley, Blumenthal contends that even as we protest God's evil action we do not sever the relationship much as a child should not sever relationship with an abusive parent "except where the victim is in danger of life and limb."[53]

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[51]Ibid., 31-32.

[52]See Rita Nakashima Brock's forward, Blumenthal, xiii.

[53]Blumenthal, 223.

To Farley, Blumenthal states, "I agree that we could not worship an abusive God, but God, in a theology of image rooted in personalist language, like real people including ourselves, is not always abusive."[54] Gee, this is encouraging! Sometimes God is abusive but not always. In other words, any time I walk through God's door I should be prepared to duck. Can one worship a god one cannot trust? Once again it is a relationship built on fear: when will God abuse me again? Since flight is not advised (Blumenthal holds to not severing the relationship) fight or fright become the options. I will match God's abuse with my own, following God's model, or I will cower. The cowered spirit is the servile spirit. As Farley claims, "Worship of the abusive father god looks to me like...servility or complicity."[55]

The god described by our various writers is not a god that I can consider worthy of worship. The all-powerful god of their belief is hollow rather than hallowed. What good is power if you possess all of it? What good is goodness if it is not genuine and trustworthy? What meaning or sense exists in a god who demands more goodness than the god itself is capable of giving? Essentially, I maintain that vital and meaningful religious life hinges upon God's goodness. If the purpose of religion is to construct a world (Inbody) it is my presupposition that this must be coherent and meaningful.

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Farley in Blumenthal, 222.

Faith in and worship of an abusive god is ultimately neither. To adhere to a religion also means to strive to be in harmony with the being or agency worshipped. "Vital religion, as I understand it, is driven by the desire to be in harmony with what is taken to be the Holy Reality."[56] There is within common understanding a symmetry or synergy between goodness and holiness. If asked to define holiness I think most persons will use the word "good" somewhere in the definition. Indeed I think this attribute of what it means to be holy would be mentioned before "otherness" or sovereignty. Therefore, to be in harmony with the holy is to be in harmony with that which is good.

Humanity needs to believe in a higher good and to strive toward it. Earlier, as part of my discussion of the worship of raw, unmitigated power I suggested we are what we worship ("For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," Matthew 6:21). This is true of goodness as well. An evil god legitimates evil; a good God legitimates good. "The belief that God is not good will eventually undercut our own concern for moral goodness."[57] Likewise, the belief that God is good will increase our concern for and our participation in moral goodness.

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[56]Griffin, 27.

[57]Ibid., 28.

What does it mean to claim that God is good? Putting the technical linguistics of process theology aside it means that God always wills the best possible good. In a mutual and faithful relationship with that which has been and is being created God calls forth the good within every actuality. God gives of Godself as God relates to that which has been created; in mutual relationality with creation God strives to order the chaos which remains. The God of goodness that creates, reconciles, and consummates through ongoing self-giving is the God who brings forth worship and faith.

CHAPTER VI:

THE KENOSIS OF GOD

My desire to hold fast to God's goodness is connected not only to my belief that a vital religious life hinges on this goodness but to my conviction that God is revealed incarnationally as loving and faithful, attributes of a good God. Here, then, the center of my theology (or theodicy) comes into focus; this is the core which so far has been implicit and confined to footnotes. Through the incarnation of God in Christ, God reveals the fullness of who God is, how God relates, what God expects of those whom God has created, and how God responds to the problem of pain and suffering. Since God began to create God was "incarnationally" involved in the world, "sailing into the wind, tacking, backstitching," as God discovered how to be the God of such a creation. As God acted and was acted upon it came to be that God took flesh and dwelt among us. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ we can know God's purposes. It is Christ's comportment that gives finer definition to what it means to speak of God's power and goodness.

For many years I have lived in the tension of a spirituality based upon my understanding of Philippians 2:1-8. God, through and in Jesus the Christ on the cross, was emptied for the sake of relationship with the world. In the cross God in Christ experienced suffering, humiliation, degradation, and shame. The power of God is in God's relationship with the created order, in God's servanthood. Through Christ's life and death God discovered what it is to be human; through Christ's life and death humanity discovered what it is to be fully human/fully divine. Through Christ we see clearly God's self-giving love.

The tension enters here. There is a fine line between self-giving and self-abnegation, between an atonement theory which makes whole and one which demolishes. If in Christ's cross persons find a companion in their suffering and therefore strength to face it, fine; if, however, suffering itself becomes the center of what it means to "be a Christian," this is perversion. Too many persons remain in abusive situations because they believe the abuse to be "their cross to bear" or because they are products of traditional Christianity which can be interpreted as propagating the servitude of marginalized persons.[58]

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[58]Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood," in *A Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

Examining the theme of servanthood Grant asks how teaching a people they are called to a life of service can be justified when they have been oppressed by exploitative forms of service. How can Jesus be lifted up as the one to serve, the one sent by God to redeem humanity, when Jesus and God have been "the principle weapons in the oppressors' arsenal to keep Blacks and Black women in their appropriate place?"[59] Grant suggests we move away from the idea of servanthood, laden as it is with oppressive connotation, and embrace the model of discipleship. Servanthood implies subordination; discipleship implies empowerment.

Similarly, Christine Smith strongly warns that the traditional language of Christian salvation and atonement encourages self-abnegation and a misplaced value on suffering. "No cross is changed into a moment of glory; no experience of suffering is transformed into an experience of joy or hope. Human beings do not transcend crosses and crucifixions; they experience them in all their horror and degradation."[60] Death does have sting, suffering is not swallowed up in victory, Christ' s death on the cross did not cancel sin or conquer evil. The funeral home, the hospital room, our own hearts, the daily newspaper proclaim these truths.

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[59]Ibid., 209.

[60]Smith, 157.

What can atonement mean in this world we inhabit? Once again incarnational theology gives us a clue. It is the incarnation–God, incarnate–who atones, not the suffering Jesus. Crucifixion as atonement is sacralized violence. The suffering of Jesus on the cross as the sole instrument of atonement is sacralized self-abnegation. Jesus' suffering on the cross must be viewed within the panorama of the incarnation: the nativity, life, ministry, death, resurrection of Christ. The incarnation, as it is experienced in these events, tells us about God's nature and activity; it speaks to us of the life of God.

> If atonement means that human beings are not solely bound by the sinfulness of their own condition; if it means that in the face of Jesus' ministry, life, and death, human beings have seen new possibilities for their lives and their ministries in the world–then I can believe Jesus' death on the cross was redemptive. If atonement means that human beings are saved from a fatalistic power of evil in their lives by embracing and being convicted by the power of God we see incarnate in Jesus the Christ, then I can believe that the repercussions of Jesus' death on the cross had saving dimensions. If the radical love that Jesus lived and died for is so compelling that human persons seek to find their own at-one-ment with God, with the human family, and with the earth, then I can believe the impact of Jesus' death on the cross had purpose, meaning, and power.[61]

Atonement is not some static theory of sacrifice, substitution, or satisfaction; atonement is the ongoing, dynamic activity of God. Through God's incarnation in Jesus the Christ persons have discovered new possibilities for

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[61]Ibid., 158.

their lives, hope for their brokenness, and a radical love that leads to radical discipleship, not obsequious servitude. This is resurrection, not the oppression of self-abnegation. Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ persons have discerned God's purpose and God's purpose for their lives.

Due to the havoc the tradition has wreaked upon the concept of self-giving, including a propensity to reinforce images of submissive obsequiousness and therefore support, if not sponsor, oppression, it is crucial to understand what kenosis theology is and what it is not, what atonement means and what it should not mean. The Christian faith has often used its theories of atonement, its interpretations of the cross to subjugate and oppress God's children rather than seeing the cross in the light of God's incarnational activity amongst us, as God's ongoing Word calling us to right relationship within ourselves and with others.

> There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend Black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that humans had very little knowledge of. As Christians, Black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.[62]

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[62]Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 167.

God's atoning activity is redemption, resurrection, wholeness. The giving of self on the cross is one movement in the incarnational dance of God; it is a self-giving unto newness of life, not the death of the self.

The Godhead continually empties itself in its creating, reconciling, consummating activity. The crux of this activity is revealed to us in the cross of Jesus the Christ, though it is of course apparent throughout all of God's work, including the life and mission of Jesus. Throughout his life Jesus was about the work of emptying himself in obedience to God. This was/is the work of Christ. This is what I understand atonement to mean–the emptying of self in obedience to God. The English word atonement signifies the condition of being "at one" after two parties had been estranged from each other. The Greek word that was translated atonement in Romans 5.11 (KJV) literally means "downing the otherness" and is rendered elsewhere as reconciliation. To be at one with another is to "down" self, i.e. to empty the self for the other, to be reconciled. Christ Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, becoming a servant, obedient even unto death, even the humiliating, agonizing, forsaken death experienced on a cross.

In this atoning life and death, obedient only to God, acknowledging God alone as destiny and authority, Jesus the Christ rejects all the powers of idolatry, and when he rejects them he breaks their power.

How does this act atone for us? In two ways, both difficult to articulate. First, if we truly believe that God had to experience human death in the sense of forsakeness and abandonment in order to redeem and reconcile, then it was in this act of acknowledging and experiencing God-forsakeness that God became one with us. God emptied Godself of what it meant to be God, experiencing the anxiety of what it means to be human.[63] Simultaneously, in a way that can only be mystery, God allowed humanity to experience the first fruits of God's kingdom. A new possibility of existence was realized, one that is capable of self-giving love–this is the ushering in of a new community which is at one with God. Inseparable from this is the meaning of the resurrection. Through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, the transformation into God's new age has begun. We participate in this realm insofar as we partake of Christ, not seeing equality as a thing to be grasped but emptying ourselves, becoming servants of God, disciples of Christ.

What we experience God to be, indeed what I believe God inherently is, is self-giving love that creates, reconciles, and consummates. Humanity, created by God as the image of God, is called forth by God to this same self-

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[63]This is what it means to speak of the power of God; it is the power to become weak, discovering in the process what genuine power is. Power means nothing outside of relationship–the relationship within the Godhead, within creation, and between the Godhead and creation.

giving love. Created as the image of God, God has chosen humanity to be in special relationship with God. Humanity is intended to live in such a way that through its cooperation with God and the rest of creation all of creation will be fulfilled, i.e., God's realm will reign on earth as God intends. To be made as the image of God then includes responsibility. We are not to dominate other creatures or fellow creatures; we are to be as the image of God to them–give of ourselves to them in creative, reconciling, consummating ways. However, scripture, reason, experience, revelation, culture, and even tradition (Irenaean) demonstrate that humankind was not created perfect *ab initio*, but with the potential to become the perfected being intended by God. The "stamp" of God's image is this potential to so respond to God that we become fully human, fully God. Implicit in this capability of response is self-direction (to some degree), free will, and responsibility. God cannot zap one into full humanness–it is a process. And this is true individually or corporately. The human creature was created to exist within a world which includes nature, society, and God. The attainment of full humanness, individually or socially, rests upon the nature of our actions and reactions within that world. When these actions and reactions are consistent with the creating, reconciling, consummating work of God this is what it means to serve God. This is ministry.

Ministry is service to and of God that is called forth by God through God's own self-giving to and through creation. As in my earlier discussion of atonement, I believe it is crucial to understand what a kenosis doctrine of ministry means and what it does not mean. Since the popular phrase for interpreting ministry is "servant leadership," perhaps it is particularly important for ministering persons to understand these distinctions. Moreover, persons who are traditionally expected to be submissive, obsequious, and docile and who are called to minister within a system within the tradition must be clear what self-giving servanthood ministry means and what it does not.

Implicit in any discussion of self-giving is the question of the meaning of power. Indeed to speak of God's activity as self-giving, especially in the trinitarian terms of the cross of Christ, defines God's power very differently than does the traditionally white, western, male viewpoint of classic theism. God's power is not unilateral, all the power there is–power for power's sake–but the power of relationship. This is the power that calls forth self-giving ministry in others.

I think it is apparent that in one truly seeking to faithfully minister the problem is not claiming too much "power" in the traditional sense, but failing to utilize the genuine power that comes through serving God. Obedience to God's power is not submission to dominative power ala Beldon

Lane (the abusive parent God of "tough love") but obedience to God and only God that flows lovingly out of the love that first loved us. It is the divine initiative that calls forth self-giving. In relation to God then there is no danger in losing self as one gives of self. For though the motivation in self-giving is not self-finding, this is the promise. Actually in self-giving we speak not of personal motivation, but of response to God's initiative. Indeed, if the motivation in self-giving is in any way for self-reward then it is not true self-giving but self-seeking idolatry. Lochman quotes Eberhard Jungel:

> Only in abandonment of the self do we really discover the self...In seeking to achieve our own individual fulfillment, we lose that salutary closeness to our individual selves for which the Holy Spirit of God equips us.[64]

In the giving of the self to God and to God's creatures there is genuine freedom–only in the Spirit of self-giving do we truly discover the self and find the self. This is christhood. Thus this is the life and ministry in which we participate.

One of the most powerful signs of this ministry, as I am given to understand and practice it, is the basin and towel. As yet another incarnational moment, another step in God's dance, the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus shows us what it means to speak of God's power. God

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[64]Jan Lochman, *The Faith We Confess* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 188.

is incarnate in the one who washes another's feet, in the one who did not come to be served but to serve.

If there is concern that this model implies self-doubt, self-abnegation, or self-destruction in some masochistic sense there should not be. Look to Christ; we do not see a wimp or a masochist. We see a radical teacher prophesying against the powers and principalities of his day. We see a bold healer, a reconciler who reaches out to the "untouchables" who is not bothered by popular opinion. We see courage against injustice; we see obedience only unto God. But even this obedience is in relationship with God–the garden prayer, the forsakeness of the cross–these are of God, with God, against God.

Moltmann's trinitarianism and panentheism place the concept of self-giving within the fullness of God.[65] Grace is not limited to its christological expression. For Moltmann the cross is *in* God, exists everlastingly in the heart of God. I understand this to mean pre-Calvary as well as post-resurrection. God is crucified, God is God-forsaken, God experiences the death of God, God descends into hell. Nothing is shut off from God if God has been crucified. We discover God in forsakeness and desolation, and every bit we endure is taken up by God and endured by God.

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[65]Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

In Moltmann's thought there is more than Good Friday, however. He holds the theology of the cross with the theology of hope, Good Friday with Easter, suffering with hope. Resurrection is not a consolation for suffering but is a sign of "God's great protest" against suffering and death. It is God's sign that what now is, is not what God intends. Faith in the risen Christ does not give rise to complacency that all will be well in the great by and by, but rises us up out of apathy and cynicism to action. We faithfully do what we can to work toward God's realm, as does God. Micah sums up this work succinctly: Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God. Through the resurrection, which is shorthand for the ongoing creating, reconciling, consummating activity of God, the light of God's realm is reflected in the present, "so that eternal hope kindles daily hope."[66]

This concept of the realm of God ties in well with my own understanding of eschatology which I see to be a part of my answer to the problem of theodicy. And if theodicy is really "nothing more" than one's doctrine of God, the stating of God's purposes, then eschatology, defined by Carmean not Hick, is one aspect of the answer.

"...God has put eternity into the human mind, yet so that we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." As the lines from

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[66]See Richard Vieth, *Holy Power, Holy Pain* (Bloomington: Meyer Stone, 1988), 104.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 depict, the human mind has long been entertained with thoughts eschatological. So long a part of our Scripture, our tradition, and even our reason, eschatology must be dealt with in any attempt to construct a theological foundation. Moreover, it must be dealt with in any explication of the nature of Christian hope, in any attempt to provide a theodicy.

Does the biblical understanding of eschatology and its related concepts such as "eternity," "the end," "new creation," "kingdom of God," necessarily imply a sudden and cataclysmic ending to the world? There are voices within the tradition that loudly proclaim such an apocalyptic ending to this world. The claim is that only such a sudden, final, complete, and possibly destructive inbreaking of God will finally consummate God's creation. Certainly there is within the canon texts which will attest to this claim. There are also texts which should give us pause if we seek to make apocalypse the center of Christian hope. Ezekiel 16, Isaiah 55, other Old Testament repentance of God texts as well as the Kingdom of God teachings of Jesus immediately come to mind.

A reading of these texts makes clear that the main question of eschatology is not how God's creation will be consummated at some distant future point but what it means to live in the hope that creation is being consummated as God moves within this creation–as God's providence edifies and advances creation, as God's grace calls creation to account, as God's love

forgives and reconciles, as God seeks relationship within creation itself. The only question of how is: How are we to relate to this providential, gracious, reconciling God who first seeks us? The key to eschatology is relationship not apocalypse.

All this is to say that if the fulfillment of creation–personal, communal, and cosmic–depends on God acting unilaterally in one big-bang, cataclysmic act that we call apocalyptic, what meaning can we attribute to the process of creation? When God began to create why didn't God create the world in the state it will be in post-apocalyptically?

Now this is not to say that God is not the author of the kingdom or that it is not God's grace that is realizing it; however, through Christ we have been invited to be participants. "To anticipate the coming of the Kingdom of God is merely sentimental, a private frivolity, unless one tries to reshape society according to the form of the imminent community, a form defined by equality and universality and requiring particular attention to the disinherited and oppressed."[67] Due to the ongoing, self-giving activity of God–creating, reconciling, consummating–the kingdom of God is already present. Due to the recalcitrant nature of humanity, the ambiguous nature of the world, the kingdom of God has not yet arrived. But great is God's

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[67]Glenn Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (November, 1989), 26.

faithfulness. Indeed, evil is not the mystery–it is the faithfulness of God that is unfathomable. I believe that God will never cease from the quest for universal reconciliation. Furthermore, this victory can only come when there is the free cooperation of every responsible creature.[68] God is the architect, contractor, financier of the kingdom; we are asked to wear the hard-hats–called to various tasks for the edification of the kingdom. If we think that we alone can build the kingdom, can fulfill the created order, then we are idolatrous self-exalters. If we think that God alone builds the kingdom then why was incarnation necessary? why did Paul preach? why were free beings created in the first place? what good, what meaning is there in a finally consummated kingdom? The key to eschatology, the crux of theology and of theodicy, is relationship.

We traditionally think only of what consummated creation means for us, given the centrality of relationship–I wonder what it means for God. If in consummated creation the personal, communal, and cosmic find their fulfillment in God, does not a dynamic, related God find something akin to fulfillment within the process also? Here I am reminded of the concept of moving from perfection to perfection–is that what happens within God within the process of consummation?

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[68]See John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 367.

Humanity participates in this process as we demonstrate our hope for the life that defeats death in our protest against the many forms of death in the midst of life. In this sense we respond to the suffering and evil we encounter by joining with God in partnership against it, even as God joins us. There exists suffering that cannot be explained or prevented, but God joins us in that suffering, suffers with us, endures it and all other suffering, and simultaneously God provides the grace that will allow us to endure it also. However, life experience suggests that we must be open to receiving God's grace in such a way that God can indeed work toward the greatest possible good that can come out of a given situation. Human freedom can thwart God's purposes.

When one considers the magnitude of evil in the world it would seem that the divine purpose has been significantly thwarted. This "damned proportionality" question will not go away. I am unwilling to accept Hick's conclusion that the future good will be so great that it will render acceptable, in retrospect, the whole human experience with all its happiness as well as all its wickedness. Nothing can reconcile the Holocaust, the thought itself is unconscionable. Wiesel is correct that we must all remember the Holocaust, for forgetting would not only add to its evil but also increase the likelihood of it being repeated.

When I read protest theology, especially when I read Wiesel, I wonder if God feels condemned–a murdered, impotent God condemned paradoxically to live, watching as the world is devoured by flames, always remembering more than any human could ever remember. I think this deeper-than-we-could-know grief does exist in God. However, similarly all the good that has ever happened has also been taken up into God and so God also remembers more joy than any human could ever remember. Wiesel gives voice to the murdered God–a giggling child gives voice to the living joyful God. I think of God in terms of this tension that exists within God Godself. And somehow in the tension itself is God's faithfulness. For through the pain and through the joy God has not stopped being God in that God has continued creating, reconciling, and consummating in whatever way God can within the given situation–the jig of grace, sometimes limping, sometimes leaping.

I have just finished reading a marvelous novel. At one point in the story, Felix, a Jewish man orphaned as a child during the Holocaust, is reflecting upon his life and life in general as he listens to a great pianist. A particular young man in the audience catches his attention, he watches him watch the pianist play. Felix imagines that young man, inspired so by the music, will go home, sit down at his own piano and play the music he had heard in the concert hall, music his busy life had kept him from playing. "The young man would sit down at the bench, flex his hands, take a deep

breath, and if he was a good sight-reader, carry himself through those rapturous passages with a lift of the spirits. Life would seem a finer, mysterious thing because of the music."[69] The young man would not be Arrau, the great pianist, Felix reflected, but he would be "partaking of the same art and be sustained by his participation."[70] Felix recalls the words of his uncle, "Not everyone can be a *Kunstler,* but many of us, fortunately, can be *Teilnehmer in Kunst.* We can be partners in art."[71]

And so it is in the artistry of creation, humanity dancing with God, participating with God, the great artist, in a circle of self-giving love.

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[69]Gail Godwin, *A Southern Family* (New York: Avon Books, 1988), 317.

[70]Ibid., 318.

[71]Ibid., 319.

PART TWO:

METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND IMPLEMENTATION

CHAPTER VII:

GOD GOES TO THE MOVIES: THE METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF THIS MODEL OF MINISTRY

A. METHODOLOGY

> Why is it that people hurt each other? Why don't people love each other? I learned quickly that story is the best place to explore these unanswerable questions. Facts are limited; they don't carry us very far. Story is where we look for truth.[72]

> Whether in the short story, novel, biography or autobiography, the metaphor of fiction or the fictional use of words as a metaphor is merely another way of getting at the truth. And that's why when Jesus especially wanted to make a point, he told a story.[73]

Madeleine L'Engle, Larry Woiwode and I agree. Story *is* where we look for truth; story embodies and expresses truth; indeed, in a primary sense, story is the truth long before theologians try to state it in propositions. There is a primacy to narrative truth prior to any propositional truth.

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[72]Madeleine L'Engle, "Interview with Madeleine L'Engle" Interview by Neil Alexander. Cokesbury's Good Books Catalog (Fall/Winter, 1994-5), 2.

[73]Larry Woiwode, "A Conversion with Larry Woiwode" Interview by Harold Fickett. *Image*, no. 5 (Spring 1994), 77.

All my literate life I've been struck by the interplay of words, words woven to "get at" a concept, to uncover a truth, to describe the undescribable. Words put together to tell a story have often connected to my own story so deeply that it was as if the two were intertwined. Another's story truly experienced elicits a rueful smile of self-recognition, a moan of identification. Sometimes a tear on one's cheek is the only sign that the word has spoken and has been received as beauty or as truth.

It is significant, I believe, that the Scripture itself records the incarnation as the Word becoming flesh and living amongst us.[74] That truth is a narrative–the story of Jesus–before it is a doctrine or a dogma. Furthermore, as Christ lived amongst us he lived as one who told stories. He took the common experiences of his listeners' day and wove them into stories which would embody and express his truth. Some of his stories were simple and direct, others were subtle, complex and ambiguous. I imagine Christ's listeners responding to the former with immediate recognition and insight; I imagine the latter requiring more thought. The listener walks away pondering, perhaps the story stays with her for days, he cannot shake Christ's images from his mind until, slowly, meaning and truth begin to dawn.

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[74]See John 1.

In the introduction to a collection of short stories Peter Hawkins points out that Jesus' parables are fiction. Jesus' parables are "striking in their refusal to wear religion on their sleeve, indeed striking in their avoidance of conventional spirituality."[75] In other words, Jesus' stories, considered outside the canon, are not obviously stories of faith; however, they have struck a chord within humanity. They speak truth to us and from them we learn how to live. Indeed, Woiwode claims the "best side effect of the best of fiction–is that it teaches us how to live."[76]

Christians would agree with Woiwode when considering the stories about Jesus and the parables of Jesus, but Woiwode maintains, as do I, that this is true concerning other stories as well. The best of fiction teaches us who we are and how to live. Story entwines with one's life and points to truth. I want to be clear that I am not giving to all fiction the meaning, the sacrality, that is inherent in Jesus' teachings. Nevertheless, stories, in books or on celluloid, reveal truth and are therefore a part of theological dialogue. The truth, about ourselves and about God, is not confined to the canon; it is discovered in the stories of all sorts and kinds of human beings, the stories of our lives *and* in the stories we create.

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[75]Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins, *Listening for God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 9-10.

[76]Woiwode, 78

In *Saint Paul at the Movies*, Robert Jewett asserts that films "disclose truth in their own right and thus qualify as valid conversation partners in dialogue with Pauline letters."[77] Assuming Jewett would concur, I maintain that the conversation is not limited to Saint Paul; the rest of the canon, the stories of our own lives, and theology join in the dialogue.

Though I was unaware of Jewett's work with film when I began this project I resonate with his methodology. Jewett has abandoned the tradition of using contemporary fictional materials as mere illustrations. "To illustrate presumes that truth is already fully understood by the speaker."[78] Likewise, I did not select movies as illustrations of particular concepts or of my own preconceived "truth."

My assumption is that movies need not illustrate theological truths; they are themselves "grist for the mill" of theological reflection. The best of cinema, like the best of literature, tells us who we are and how to live. It connects us to our own stories and to our primal story, the story of who we are in relation to our Creator. I do not attend a movie, theological text in hand, searching for abstract, propositional truth about God, about humanity, about the relationship between creation and God. Yet I am often confronted with theological truth in the movie

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[77]Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 7.

[78]Jewett, 11

theater. For example, in *Pulp Fiction,* in the midst of radical, inexplicable evil there is a stunning moment of repentance, reconciliation, and unexpected grace. This is not an "illustration" of grace, but a moment which gives the viewer opportunity to reflect, a moment of unexpected grace.

As previously stated, movies were used in this project as a springboard and as subject matter for theological reflection. Between weekly sessions project participants were asked to view a particular movie, keeping certain open-ended questions in mind. Though the questions varied somewhat week to week they usually included queries such as, "What images of God did you see in the movie?" "Were there incidents of goodness, of evil?" Participants then discussed scenes or dialogue where they observed, experienced, or heard these images or examples; they also joined in free-wheeling discussion of the movie and of the issues of theodicy. Each week we endeavored to focus on certain aspects of the theodicy trilemma; the movies or stories were in conversation with us as we considered these concepts. All of the issues in theodicy arose and were explored, but the format was the narrative of the short story and the cinema instead of the theological textbook.

Like life itself, the stories told in movies are more complex and more subtle, indeed "messier" than theological literature. Consequently, the systematic clarity and "neatness"of the text is replaced by the richness of the story. The visuals, dialogue, and music of film grab attention and hold interest

in a way a text does not and therefore a film represents the way the issues and options of theodicy are presented in real life–in narrative forms and contexts instead of discourse. In film and in story all the issues and options arise as "real life issues" instead of formal textbook issues. In this project, film and short story proved a highly accessible means for theological reflection upon the abstract theological claims as well as upon the theological meaning of our own experiences.

Films are a part of the modern culture. Even in our parishes, members are frequently more comfortable with and knowledgeable of movies than they are with theology in the formal sense. Indeed, more time may be spent before the VCR than reading Scripture. Jewett claims that theology in the contemporary scene should take movies seriously due to the realization that many Americans are molded much more decisively by popular culture than by their formal education or their religious training.[79] More than 80 percent of American households have video cassette recorders; video rentals averaged eighty million per week in 1992. Six to seven million videos are purchased each week. It is my observation that wherever I go in our culture today people are talking about the movies they have seen. Movies are a part of our communal fabric, a common touchstone for an all too often fractured society. Movies are accessible to us, far more so than a theology text. For the participants in this

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[79]Jewett, 4-5

model of ministry, movies and stories joined the dance–partners with scripture, with theology, and with our own experiences in the jig of grace.

B. THE GOALS AND DESIGN OF THIS MODEL OF MINISTRY

The genesis of this project is threefold: my interest in the connection between one's concept of God and one's response to suffering and evil; experiences, mine and others (including the biblical witness) of suffering and evil *and* of divine grace; and the interplay and impact of traditional theology in the lives of average persons, that is, those untrained in the discipline of theology.

My expectations were that participants would grow in faith as they were "given permission" to question their faith and to struggle with the issues and options of theodicy. Although I truly expected that it would indeed be struggle as persons grappled with these issues, it was my prayerful hope, as well as my expectation, that we would all be stronger as a result of our task. It was also my expectation that project participants would learn to view movies and read stories through theological eyes; they would notice theological themes in non-theological media more readily. As persons learned to think and observe theologically they would continue to develop new theological insight which would lead to stronger faith. Theological reflection and vital faith go hand in hand. This vital faith, based upon solid theological reflection, will serve well in life's daily exigencies as well as in times of acute suffering and tragedy.

As the outline of the project unfolded, and was discussed with my peer seminar members, my personal and professional goals developed and aided in the project design. It is difficult to keep the goals separate; the personal merges with the professional. The first four goals, however, tend toward the personal, that is, they are more directly related to my own belief. The last four goals are broader, speaking more to the wider purpose of the project and the wider context of the Church and my ministry.

1. To increase my knowledge of the current theological literature regarding theodicy.
2. To clarify and claim my personal theological beliefs, specifically regarding kenosis christology as it relates to the concept of power.
3. To reconcile my theology, in light of my rejection of theism and its eschatology, to particular liturgies of the church, particularly the funeral liturgy.
4. To test my claim that one's image of God is directly related to how one lives one's life, especially in response to crisis.
5. To continue to develop a resource list of accessible media from popular culture which raise theological issues.
6. To provide a framework which will help others reflect theologically, not only concerning their own lives but about the culture in general.

7. Given that the issues of theodicy are essentially questions about the concept of God, use novels and film which directly raise these issues to help persons define their concepts/images of God.
8. To develop a course of study usable across the church.

These goals provided a guideline for the design of the study as well as one means of evaluating it and were kept in mind throughout the study. Indeed, when the discussions were going "full-tilt" as project participants engaged the subject matter, it was very helpful to me to recall my goals.

C. PROJECT ASSOCIATES AND CONSULTANTS

An important aspect of the design of this model of ministry was the prior biblical training of the participants. As I mentioned in the project overview in chapter one, each participant had at least completed one year of comprehensive Bible study. Biblical study not only brought forth the issues of theodicy; it gave the participants a scriptural foundation for our discussions in this model of ministry. Although this model was not a Bible study, the Bible was indirectly our "text" for the course.

Several weeks prior to the first session of the project I set up meetings with the context associates, persons from the congregation who were aware of this project and its goals. Four of these associates were project participants, one was not. The first context associate meeting turned into a wonderful discussion

of the issues and options in theodicy as we attempted to develop a design for the course. It was noted by each associate the issues meld into one another as the topic is engaged; it is difficult to "keep a lid on" the discussions as questioning minds leap to related issues or to possible options. A meeting scheduled for an hour became three as question led to question, idea to idea. I sat back, struck by the intensity, the commitment, the energy of the group and by the enormity of the task before us. How could we systematically cover that which needed to be covered in such a course while allowing for the spontaneous discussion which seemed not only to naturally occur but which also seemed crucial to our process?

It was important to the project associates and to me that the process not become didactic; it needed to draw on the energy and questions of the participants even if that energy diverted us from the "lesson plan." On the other hand, we needed certain parameters for discussion, a controlling framework or guideline. The project associates suggested using the trilemma of theodicy as a loose framework for the thirteen week course, with each "prong" of the trilemma becoming the controlling topic for three sessions, beginning with the existence of evil, moving to the issues of power, and concluding with concepts of goodness. Movies would be chosen based upon their potential for "conversation" with these topics.

In consultation with the context associates the following design developed. The first two hour session was an introduction and overview. The

next three sessions focused on the topic of evil and suffering (what is evil, does evil exist, is it real or apparent, etc.). Sessions five, six, and seven examined the concept of God's power (what is the nature of God's power, what does the Incarnation tell us about God's power, what about human freedom, etc.). Sessions eight, nine, and ten considered what it means to speak of God's goodness (what is the nature of God's goodness, is there evil within God, is there ambiguity within the Godhead, etc.). Eschatology and hope were discussed in the eleventh session. The twelfth session included a review of what had been covered and a discussion of our tentative conclusions. The last session was evaluation. Ten movies and two short stories were considered during the course of study. The media were chosen for particular weeks based upon their "connection" with the theme. Although I chose the films and stories class members participated, to some extent, in choosing their order.

Prior to the first class session, group members were asked to read Harold Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* and Leslie Weatherhead's *The Will of God.* Each book, in its own way, provided a simple overview of the issues. C.S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed* were recommended. Also prior to the first session each class member wrote an essay describing her or his current thoughts and beliefs on these issues; this essay focused on the participants' concept of God. These

essays were not shared with the entire class but were compared with similar essays written for the last class session. Students addressed the same questions in the second essay but included reflection upon how their thoughts were affected by the study. Though subjective this was one method of evaluating the course itself. Another means of evaluation was a survey on suffering taken the first and last session. This survey was based upon a tool prepared for the February, 1994 issue of *U.S. Catholic.*

In addition to the counsel of the context associates my consultants were also helpful in the design of this model.

Dr. Ed McNulty, pastor and nationally recognized expert on the subject of film and religion, discussed various films for possible use in the project. He also helped me work through the issues concerning the use of contemporary movies in the church. Although I was selecting the movies carefully it was obvious that several films would contain objectionable material. Dr. McNulty likened films to family members–perhaps one's aunt is somewhat rough or not like you yet you love her and can even learn from her. It proved to be a helpful analogy. Dr. McNulty and I agreed it would be best to address these issues forthrightly at the outset of the project.

Andrew Hudgins, a highly regarded poet and a professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, helped me reflect on the interplay between theology and fiction. His work has enriched my understanding of an artist's

creative process especially as it is in "dialogue" with the one who experiences the art. In other words, a screenwriter or a director may work without theological intent yet the viewer of a film may connect to it in such a way that it becomes a spiritual experience.

Erin McGraw, a respected fiction writer and an assistant professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, listened as I "imagined" my way through the project, asking questions or making suggestions at certain junctures that were helpful to my process. Not only did we discuss particular films or novels in relation to my subject matter we also discussed possible connections between faith development and culture, particularly the culture of popular media.

The planning of this model of ministry provided a workable design for the implementation of the project which is described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VIII:

SUNDAY NIGHT AT THE MOVIES, A JIG OF GRACE: IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS MODEL OF MINISTRY

The actual implementation of this model of ministry closely followed the design; therefore, I will not reiterate the description but will use this chapter to elaborate upon each session after a few general comments regarding the process.

Meeting on Sunday evenings, each session, other than the first and last, began with a general discussion of the previously assigned film, including whether "God images," examples of evil, goodness, or power were evident in the film. After this general discussion we looked more carefully at the topic for the session, considering that particular issue in theodicy and the options available. The thematic discussion was then connected back to the film as participants allowed the theological options to speak to the story of the movie and vice versa.

Woven throughout the discussion were group members' own stories, including a female participant's experience of spousal abuse, which became another one of the "touchstones" for the group throughout the course. The

sharing of her experience, off and on throughout the study, was unplanned yet it helped us focus on the issues at hand. More importantly, some healing seemed to take place for her as she saw others respond to her experience with compassion and new learning about the intricacies of living with abuse.

Each session concluded with an overview of the next week's session, the assignment of the film and reflection questions, and with prayer. The discussions were free-wheeling, intense, and highly energized. As I anticipated, the "trilemma framework" provided an organizing guideline for our discussions, yet the topics still melded with each other as persons made connections and raised questions. I viewed this as a positive development as it demonstrated the participants' growing grasp of the issues and options involved as well as the importance of providing forums for this type of study.

A brief description of the highlights of each week's session follows:

During the first session we reviewed the issues of theodicy as we had experienced them in our previous biblical studies and in our life experiences. The format for our sessions together was also described. We discussed our group covenant which included the promise of confidentiality and the importance of open communication with one another throughout the course so that we could be sensitive to each other if someone began to feel overwhelmed by the issues. The survey of suffering was taken and the paragraph about God was discussed and assigned for the next session.

Questions participants were to address in the essay included: Who is God? What does God look like–what/who do you envision when you pray? What does God do/not do? What is/are your image(s) of God?

The topic of evil was introduced through a series of questions which helped us begin to make distinctions between evil, suffering, "badness," and tragedy (or helped us decide there are no distinctions, depending upon one's point of view). Participants were asked to recall a few "bad" experiences they had known in their lives and then to decide which of those experiences they would classify as "evil" and why. We also discussed whether there are different types of evil, whether all suffering is evil, and whether all evil brings suffering. The participants were in agreement that there are distinctions, not all bad things are evil, not all suffering is evil, yet all evil causes suffering.

The film *Schindler's List* and related reflection questions were assigned for the following session. *Schindler's List* was chosen as the first film of the series as it deals with all the issues we would consider throughout the course of study. Evil, goodness, various biblical images of God, and hope are just a few of the possible ideas discovered in the film. However, since it deals with Holocaust as well as other issues of evil and sin, it seemed an effective means of starting our consideration of evil. As it turned out,

Schindler's List became a reference point for the entire series, a touchstone we returned to often throughout our discussion.

Though we realized we would not be able to view all the films as a group we chose to see *Schindler's List* together due to its powerful impact. Some members of the group chose to view it twice, once in their homes early in the week and then with the group on Sunday. This pattern worked well so several participants chose to meet every Sunday afternoon to watch that week's movie together even if they had seen it previously.

Session Two continued our discussion of evil. We began with a general discussion of *Schindler's List*, giving persons opportunity to respond to the film's effect upon them. From this discussion we moved to a consideration of the reflection questions assigned for the film: What examples of evil, if any, did you identify? What examples, if any, of hope? What definitions of power did you hear, particularly in the conversation between Schindler and Goeth, the Nazi officer? Did Schindler change, and if so, how, why, and when? What images of God, if any, did you experience?

The question concerning evil helped us begin to make distinctions between what is experienced as evil and what is "bad." For example, every participant commented that Schindler's adultery was bad but no one was willing to classify it as evil. However, everyone agreed that the atrocities committed against the Jews was evil. On the other hand no one was willing

to describe the administering of poison to hospitalized patients by their doctor evil, as it was viewed as mercy killing, better to die peacefully at the hands of someone who cares than by the machine guns of the Gestapo storming the hospital. Though unwilling to define evil at this point, the participants commented that it seemed to be an intuitive understanding, one knows evil when it is "experienced."

Images of God were noted in several characters or scenes in the movie. Interestingly, not all the images were positive. Although with obvious distaste, we considered the idea that Goeth, the arbitrarily cruel Nazi, could be defended as an image of God. We set this concept in juxtaposition with Psalm 88, a psalm which seems to describe God as one who causes arbitrary terror, pain, and ostracism. Participants commented that this god is represented in some biblical texts and in the traditions of certain religions. Indeed, some recalled it as the controlling metaphor of their early religious training.

This session concluded with the assignment of the film *Shadowlands*, the story of C.S. Lewis' marriage to Joy Gresham and of his devastating pain when she died of cancer.

Since the movie *Shadowlands* deals with issues of suffering and loss our third session focused on evil and its connection to suffering. After general discussion of the film and the reflection questions pertaining to it we

moved into a conversation about suffering as it relates to evil. This discussion focused on the question of proportionality, that is, do we need evil in order to know and appreciate goodness, sadness to know joy, and if so, how much of one do we need in order to know the other? Obviously, these questions were not answered definitively. As with many questions discussed throughout this project it seemed just as important to raise and reflect upon certain questions as it was to come up with answers.

The fourth session concluded our "formal" discussion of evil although the theme continued to be raised throughout the study. By this point persons were identifying evil as real and virulent; no one in the group viewed evil as only "appearing" to be evil due to humanity's limited vision or experience. Therefore, the question was not about evil's existence but about its nature. *Schindler's List* helped us examine massive, radical evil, *Shadowlands*, the pain of suffering, and *Corrina, Corrina* the evil of racism and systemic evil. A story of healing and reconciliation *Corrina, Corrina* tells the love story of a black woman, a white man, and the man's little girl. With humor, poignancy, and pain the reality of racism is made clear. Viewing this film allowed the group to look at racism as both personal and systemic evil. We discussed collective sin, our participation in or cooperation with evil due to our membership in society. Is it true that we become products, to some extent at least, of our cultures, "inheriting" their biases, prejudices, and

presuppositions? Several participants believed this to be true but with the qualifier that persons can also "disinherit" some of those cultural traits. In others words, the evil of racism may be a part of the culture from which we come but we can make efforts to not participate in "active" racism even as we work to come to terms with our inherent racism.

The class also discussed whether evil is always relational, that is, can evil exist outside a relationship? This led us back to the question of evil's origin which prepared us for our consideration of God's power in sessions five, six, and seven.

In session five we began to focus upon what it means to speak of God as all-powerful. First, we reviewed the past weeks, highlighting our discussions of evil. As persons considered whether God is responsible for evil, directly or indirectly, they began to speak of the nature of God's power and to what extent that power is shared by humanity. Although I planned to discuss the issues of human freedom in a later session we began to poke and prod around this concept as we reviewed the previous sessions and as we considered the film *Crimes and Misdemeanors.*

Crimes and Misdemeanors is a riveting film which focuses our attention upon deceit, jealousy, justice and injustice, guilt, human relationships and even God's relationship to us. In fact, two characters actually discuss God's activity yet they come from two very different

perspectives. After a general discussion of the film we talked about our concepts, currently and from our childhoods, of the phrase "all-powerful." Persons shared various understandings, although most seem to define the phrase as meaning God can do anything God chooses to do. God's power was defined as loving but then questions were raised as to how loving power allows evil to happen and were we back into the conundrum that is theodicy. Therefore, we revisited a scene from *Schindler's List* in which Schindler attempted to explain real power to the Nazi officer Goeth. Schindler commented that they had the power to kill arbitrarily, but that real power is to have that power but not to use it. Though intrigued by this conception of power Goeth could not practice it. I asked the group if their understanding of God's power was power as Schindler described it or as Goeth practiced it. Once again, several persons commented that they wanted to believe that God's power is more akin to the former, but their "mental tapes" often connected God to the latter.

As we moved further into the discussion of power the next week we reflected upon the movie, *Sophie's Choice*, the story of a Holocaust survivor who was forced to choose between her children in a Nazi death camp. She "chose" her son; her screaming young daughter was carried off to the death chamber. Not only did this reinforce the question of how God could allow this kind of evil to occur, it also focused us upon freedom and its connection

to power. Yes, Sophie had the power to choose, but what kind of choice was it, what kind of freedom is it that allows a mother to choose for one child to survive, one to die, so that they both will not die? What kind of freedom is it to live with the memory of the choice? The guard had more freedom than Sophie, more power. Does God give some more power, more freedom than others? Does power always have to be power "over" someone or something else? Does power always have the potential to become abusive? In sharing power with humanity through the gift of free will did God limit God's own power? Does God choose to limit God's exercise of power on a case by case basis or is God's power limited by the nature of creation? These were just a few of the questions raised by the participants as they struggled to define what it means to speak of God's power and our own free will.

The movie *Fearless* was the springboard for our conversation our seventh week together as we concluded the section on power. The main character in *Fearless*, after surviving an airplane crash in which many are killed, decides he is invulnerable and is therefore fearless. He becomes involved with another survivor whose two-year-old son was killed in the crash and together they begin to work through what has happened to them, albeit it in a rather bizarre manner. In one scene he attempts to help the young mother rid herself of the guilt she feels due to her son's death. Some participants thought this scene was a symbol of ultimate self-giving,

reminiscent of God's self-giving in Jesus Christ. Others, however, saw this as arrogance on the man's part as he presumed to know what was best for the woman even to the point of putting her at risk. These observations led to a discussion of Jesus' power, what it was and what it was not. It was here that perceptions of God's power began to crystallize; for Christians God's power is to be understood through the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If one wants to know what God's power is like, look to Jesus, whose weakness was his power, whose power was his weakness. Several minutes were spent recalling stories of Jesus in which he turned the world's understanding of power upside-down. As the discussion wound down I read Philippians 2, a hymn of Christ's self-giving love.

At the end of this session we discussed God's power as relational power, that is, God is related to creation. God has more power than anyone or anything else but this power is the power of self-giving love not unilateral coerciveness. God acts, the creature reacts, considering the reaction of the creature God acts again, always creating toward the best possible good given the circumstances.

Ready now to turn to our consideration of God's goodness I assigned the film *Sandlot,* a heartwarming comedy about little boys, sandlot baseball, and neighborhood legends; it is also about love, friendship, and rites of passage. A comedy was chosen because it seemed a good change of pace at

this point in the study. It was important to me that not all the films be heavy, serious, tragedy-inspired stories. *Sandlot* provided lighter fare while still evoking connections with our topic.

Our eighth session followed the basic pattern of the previous meetings. Our general conversation about *Sandlot* flowed into our discussion of God's goodness. Several members of the group saw a particular character as an image of God. Ben, a junior high ballplayer, reached out to the new kid in the neighborhood despite the jibes and complaints of his buddies. In his unassuming way, Ben draws forth the best that is in his new friend, luring skills the kid did not know he had. God's goodness and guidance was likened to Ben's manner.

An unusual image in the film was briefly pondered as an image of God. A huge junkyard dog, whose presence on the edge of the sandlot was more felt than seen, was both a fascination and a threat to the boys. A neighborhood mythology of awe grew concerning the dog, his origin, and his power. He was feared and yet their treehouse stories centered around his presence. The eventual frightening encounter with the dog ends with the boys making friends with the dog and with his blind owner. Project participants likened this to the tradition's "god mythology." We are taught God is to be feared, yet we are aware of "his" awesome presence. We are fascinated, drawn, yet we don't want to get in "his" way. Ultimately,

however, we may discover that God is not this way at all. We may come into God's presence and find welcome and friendship.

Several definitions of God's goodness were examined. Is it possible that God is to be feared like an unpredictable junkyard dog or a cruelly arbitrary Nazi officer? And, if this *is* what God is like, it is possible that this is what it means to speak of goodness in relation to God and that "someday" we will understand? By and large this was rejected; once again participants looked to Jesus for a definition of goodness.

In our discussions of Jesus' power and goodness persons were not referring to "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" but of the bold humility of one who ate with sinners, proclaimed justice, and offered unconditional love.

The next week's session continued to focus on goodness as we discussed the film *With Honors*, a story of the relationship between a down-and-out bum and a stressed-out Harvard student. Pressing toward his goal to be graduated with honors his relationship with the "bum" teaches the student what honor in life really is. Through this movie we examined the issues of forgiveness, reconciliation, honor, and success. Our discussion of success tied into our previous conversations regarding power; society's concept of success seems directly related to its definition of power. The message of the film suggests there is another way.

Our review of the film, then, turned into an examination of God's goodness *and* power as participants wanted one definition to mutually define the other. We discussed the possibility of abusive power as a part of God's goodness (see the description of Belden Lane's god in chapter VI). Although a few group members commented that some ambiguity within God is "acceptable" all agreed they could not worship a morally ambiguous God.

The word "holy" had been used to describe God throughout the project, therefore, we examined the concept of holiness more closely in this session. For most, "holy" incorporated a sense of God's awesome power but only as it is known and experienced through God's love and goodness. The connotation of "holy" is primarily a sense of supreme goodness.

The film *Shawshank Redemption* was the discussion springboard for the next two sessions as we continued our discussion of our concepts of God. We delved into the meaning of redemption as it was depicted in the movie, a portrayal of life in prison with its overwhelming despair and its moments of hope. Through it all, Andy, in prison for life, moves with dignity and grace. Session ten, then, continued the discussion of ambiguity and goodness as persons began to draw their own conclusions. Session eleven gave us opportunity to "unpack" eschatological concerns as we discussed the nature of redemption and hope. We also talked about whether God suffers when we suffer and as creation suffers.

The short story, "Salvage," by Joshua Davidson was discussed in session eleven as it also is a story of redemption.[80] It relates the story of a Nazi concentration camp doctor who is forced to treat Jewish patients after the camp has been liberated. He is transformed by the experience as he begins to see his patients as human and as he relates to the Jewish doctor who has been imprisoned in the camp but who is now his supervisor. Group members interpreted the story as reminding us that even in the midst of evil there is that which can be salvaged. This does not cancel nor explain the evil, yet it does provide the hope necessary for living.

Tender Mercies was the last film chosen for the series as it captured the flavor of the entire study. Although life had been hard and the movie's characters had suffered many tragedies they became aware of the reality of God's tender mercies, the small, good things that sustain them. We also read a short story by Raymond Carver entitled "A Small, Good Thing" which essentially celebrated small glimpses of grace in the midst of chaos.[81] These themes struck chords within the participants and were identified as being similar to their experience.

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[80]Joshua Davidson, "Salvage," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1995, 76-88.

[81]Carlson, Paula and Peter Hawkins, *Listening for God.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 74-93.

Our discussion of the movie and the story allowed us to review the series and to begin to share our tentative conclusions. Although unplanned it also became a time for persons to share their own experiences of God's grace and to reflect upon what our time together had meant to our faith and to our spiritual growth. This meaningful and moving time will be elaborated upon in the next chapter on evaluation.

Our last session was a briefer meeting during which persons completed the survey on suffering again and turned in their essays about God. We also evaluated the project through informally sharing our initial responses to the questions of theodicy and through voicing our new questions. The group asked if we could continue to meet irregularly to discuss movies and to share novels and short stories we may discover.

PART THREE:

EVALUATION, CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND REPLICABILITY

CHAPTER IX:

IT IS NOT THE DESTINATION, BUT THE JOURNEY: EVALUATION OF THIS MODEL OF MINISTRY

A. GENERAL EVALUATIVE COMMENTS AND EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION BY PARTICIPANTS

General Evaluative Comments

As a result of this model of ministry a group of persons grew in their understanding of their faith and in their relationship with God and one another. This is reflected in their written essays and through intentional evaluative dialogue I've experienced with each member since the course ended. For some, faith increased as they came to believe that God suffers with them and understands human suffering through the incarnation. Others commented that they grew closer to God as they broadened their understanding of who God is and how God acts. For some participants this meant continuing to shed images of God which limited their capability to truly worship and praise God; for others liberation was experienced as it was recognized that it is acceptable to ask theological questions, to ask questions

of their faith. Several participants experienced clarity in their questions, deciding that discovering the "real" questions is what is critical in the growth of faith. Two participants concluded that voluntarily dealing with ambiguity, within God, humanity, and creation, increases faith. Each participant commented that it was helpful and exciting to learn new tools and options for theological reflection.

Using popular media as an instrument for this reflection provided a common experience for the group in addition to its biblical study in *Disciple* and shared life experiences. The films became our theology text as we moved through this study. Through the films we were able to identify universal ideals, one participant stated, standard connotations as to what is good, bad, or redemptive. Persons commented that it was extremely meaningful to "encounter God at the movies." Participants grew in their capacity to look and listen for God in places where they would not have expected the encounter.

As the study concluded all the participants claimed strong belief in the goodness of God as goodness is normally understood. This goodness includes loving compassion, self-giving, holiness, and for some participants, a degree of ambiguity. For these persons God is not evil or abusive, yet God may at times be indifferent, or perhaps even choosing nonintervention in the human condition or particular situation. Each participant concluded that

evil does exist and is real, however, there was not total agreement as to evil's definition or origin. Defining the nature of God's power was more of a challenge to many in the group. Some concluded that God's power is shared through God's gift of free will to creation; others decided God limits God's own power and can decide to reclaim it whenever God chooses. Nevertheless, all participants tended to define God's power incarnationally; if one wants to understand what God's power is like, look at Jesus. When viewed through this christological lens God's power was defined as loving, relational, and self-giving, not as unilateral and coercive.

Evaluation of Implementation by Participants

Three specific tools were used to evaluate this project. As mentioned previously, each participant completed a survey on suffering and submitted an essay on her/his understanding of God during the first and last session of the course. Also, the discussion during the last session was for the purpose of evaluation. Although I asked questions pertaining to the process of the project, the participants focused the discussion on evaluating what happened to them, to their faith, and on their initial conclusions. In the weeks following the course I engaged participants in informal individual conversation also as a means of "checking in" with their reactions and perceptions. Interestingly, some of these conversations continue as people

make reference to our discussion as they view new movies or as situations come up in their lives or in our community.

Comparing the survey results showed several shifts in belief or thought. Three participants who had previously agreed with the statement, "God wants me to learn a lesson from my suffering," disagreed with this statement by the end of the course. The interpretation of these participants was that although we may learn through our suffering God does not send suffering so that we learn particular lessons. Four persons no longer question why God does not stop their suffering or the suffering of those they love. In class discussion these persons stated that they believe God is with them in suffering but that God may not be able to stop the suffering. Of the four persons who changed their mind as to whether suffering makes the sufferer a better person, two no longer agreed with the statement and two shifted from agreeing to being unsure. As to the statement, "Human sinfulness is the ultimate cause of suffering in the world," two persons shifted from disagreeing to agreeing and one shifted to uncertainty. In class there was much discussion of this issue; some persons concluded that human freedom is the main cause of suffering in the world but that freedom exists due to humanity being created in God's image and therefore is worth the risk. Others were drawn to this argument yet were uncomfortable with what it might imply, that is, is there hope for the world if one concludes that

suffering and evil come from human freedom rather than from some other "power?" Others concluded that this is why there is hope for the world, humanity can choose to work with God against evil and suffering.

Three persons shifted from believing that suffering, pain, and death are a part of God's will for us to believing that they are not. Although most participants stated that they believe it is possible that we can receive more suffering that we can handle, two participants who had previously thought we could never receive more suffering than we could handle shifted their position.

Though not a scientific sampling with hard and fast data the fact that shifts in participants' thinking occurred demonstrates that persons engaged the material of the course in such ways that they were open to new avenues of thought about God and about suffering. Indeed some of the shifts indicated new understandings of how God acts. I observed that persons, even where there were no shifts, wrote comments by the survey questions more often the second time they completed it. It was as if they were in dialogue with the questions and wanted to make their positions clear. This indicated an "ownership" of the material that did not exist at the beginning of the course.

The second essays of the participants reflected several significant changes especially concerning images of God, God's activity in the world, and

reported growth in prayer life. The simplest and perhaps most meaningful way to demonstrate this is through a series of quotes from various essays supplemented with my summary of their thought in their original essays (I have chosen not to identify the essay writers by name). These essays are the participants' evaluations of their understandings of God as affected by the course and therefore their "conclusions" are apparent in their comments. In the next chapter I will elaborate upon these conclusions as they relate to the theodicy trilemma.

Twelve weeks after writing that God's essential silence is more terrifying than the possibility of a God who embraces evil and questioning why no unmistakable sign of God's presence exists a twenty-five-year-old graduate student wrote:

> The most valuable part of this course for me was our commitment to look unflinchingly at today's world, today's dim, dreary hyperviolent, fragmented social imaginary, one capable of so much joy, salvation, redemption, and grace.

> For me, I find transformation to the extent that the protagonists in these movies (and the protagonists in my daily life...) display and exemplify Christ. Heaven on earth: a new way of conceiving society, all of humankind, neither man or woman, Latino nor Anglo nor African-American, neither rich nor poor, only those rich in love and courage and faith and hope.

> The carnival leader is the Lord of the Dance, a God that loves us so that no barrier (except our own stubborn pride, egotistic intellectual vanity, or blind refusal to accept) can stop God from entering our hearts and re-creating us. Heaven is not yet here on earth; but we are its agents, its very artificers.

While continuing to wrestle with the question of whether creation needs evil so that we can discern and appreciate goodness a thirty-six-year-old scientist clearly shifted her understanding of God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibeneficence. Previously stating that God is all knowing, but claiming agnosticism on whether God is all powerful, all good, and all loving, her second essay included these statements:

> I have slightly shifted (or should I say I have further shaped) my beliefs of the all knowing, all powerful issues. I believe that God gave us the marvelous gift of free will, and in doing so, God must have given up some knowledge and power. We humans have much influence over our own destiny. We make choices, and act upon our choices, and change the way the future unfolds. I think that God acts within us, when we are receptive, to help us help each other through difficult times, and to give us strength of character. Thus, God shares the power of determining the universe's destiny with us. Then it follows that God does not know exactly what we are to become.

> I believe God is a good and loving God. I must believe this, otherwise belief in God does not make sense for me. The goodness of God has the same connotations as the goodness that Jesus taught us, e.g., loving, caring, patience, compassion, etc. I believe that God wants the best possible good for all situations, and that God works through people in an attempt to create that best possible good.

A participant who is a systems analyst in his mid-forties discussed in his first essay that his prayers were confounded due to his two understandings as to how God is related to the world. On the one hand he wanted to believe that God intervenes and/or plays an understandable role in our lives; on the other hand he also wanted to believe that God created

systems and subsystems that work without further intervention on God's part. At the end of the course he wrote:

> My prayers are not as confounded as they were three months ago by my wishes for God's direct intervention and my belief in systems theory. I am more and more convinced that God has provided systems and we humans choose to use the systems in different ways. If we choose to use the systems for good, God is pleased. If we use the systems to our detriment, God grieves. God has provided the possibility for ultimate good. It is our responsibility to make good happen.

A participant who claims to have met God much later in life than most connects this delayed meeting to his training in engineering. He was taught that all problems can be solved through science, math, or perhaps even psychology. Later, as he became a part of the Church when his sons were teenagers, he found knowing God difficult. He was taught or at least thought he was taught "that God made sure that everything in the Bible was *exactly* what it said and it might even be blasphemy to think otherwise." He commented that he struggled with this concept for many years until the *Disciple* Bible study classes led him to a new revelation. At seventy-six years of age, he came to understand that God is Spirit who gives him freedom to question and to believe through faith that which cannot be understood. Basing his participation in the theodicy course upon this "new" understanding he commented:

> I believe God is in control in spite of what I perceive to be evidence to the contrary. The more I try to make sense out of things that happen, the more I'm sure that "faith" is involved

> somehow in understanding how God's kingdom operates. I visualize God as a spiritual influence somewhere, everywhere, that is always available to listen to my problems and lead me to understand.

While there was a noticeable shift in participants' language about God, specifically regarding gender (the pronouns He, His, Him were used far less frequently in the second essays) nowhere was this more evident than in the writing of a thirty-nine-year-old dietitian. In her first essay she spoke of believing that God cares for us in a "fatherly way" although "In recent years I've come to believe she could care for us in a motherly way too." In this initial essay she referred to God as "God" consistently, yet she did use a male pronoun a few times. Throughout her second essay she tried out both male and female pronouns consistently as well as "it"; commenting that she does not now envision God as an image in human form but as energy or light, as Spirit who relates personally to creation.

In her first essay she declared that God makes all things happen and that the bad events are part of "some big plan" in which the bad thing will not always be perceived as bad. Her second essay states:

> Bad things happen–evil exists–because people...make bad choices; also because the forces of nature and chaos can have destructive energies. I don't believe God makes bad things happen to punish us. Because we have the freedom to choose, some people make bad choices that affect others' lives. But, God is there to comfort us and help us through the "disasters."
>
> I believe that God is good. I can't accept the idea that God could be abusive. God gives us glimpses of goodness–bits of the

> kingdom now–we just have to recognize them and appreciate the gifts. God allows us to be who we are–gives us that freedom–and accepts us as we are, even after we've made our choices. He/She blesses us with "tender mercies" and has made humanity (or allowed it to develop) able to change and be salvaged to become better. We are also blessed with glimpses of God's goodness through beautiful images in nature as well as through love and goodness in others. God feels with us.

From this sampling of quotes I think it is obvious that persons wrestled well with the issues of theodicy and came away with new understandings which contributed to their spiritual and theological growth. Several participants also commented upon the group process and the use of film.

> Every session of our group meeting was filled with questioning, deepening of faith, engaging dialogue, fellowship, and prayer. Understanding evil, human devastation, disaster, and the social evils of racism, sexism, and classism brought to me a deeper understanding of the Scripture, God, and myself.

> Although film is limited like any other medium it does provide us two powerful advantages: dialogue spoken and images seen. The psalmists knew this when they evoked images of enduring majesty... Theologically, I conceive many parallels between the questions raised in film and the nature of God, humanity, and self.

> The films and short stories not only introduced the issues in an accessible way they also gave me a "memory hook" upon which to hang my ongoing reflection on these issues. I don't think I would have been as interested in formal theological thought nor would I be able to recall its connection to my understanding and experience.

> After this study I do not know definitively who God is. What is important is that I continue to struggle with my understanding of God. The journey of understanding is more important than the destination. This struggle manifests itself in different ways including an awareness of the theodicy issues, prayer life, and social responsibility.
>
> This group helped to raise questions I wouldn't have had on my own–it also helped me work through, or begin to work through, the issues of theodicy.

The third evaluation tool, conversation during the last session and personal interviews, was also helpful in examining the experiences of participants and the project itself.

Each participant commented that the use of film and short story was extremely effective as a means of engaging and examining the issues of theodicy. One group member stated that through the movies we could find universal ideals, some standard connotations as to what is good, what is evil, what is redemptive. Since the project's conclusion all the participants have mentioned that their television viewing, reading, and movie watching has been transformed by the project. Several said daily life has been changed also in that they see, listen, and watch more "carefully," "creatively" and "more theologically." It was mutually agreed that God turns up in some surprising places!

One group member asserted that he is "looking harder" so that he can "fix in mind what I should be able to expect from God." The person who

wrote that the journey was more important than the destination remarked in the last session that his questions are clearer, "finding out what the questions are is critical and takes the majority of one's time." Another participant observed that she appreciated the focus of the project in that it "structured the stuff that upholds the questions, in other words, we examined and developed our understandings of Jesus and our own experiences." It was also suggested that "voluntarily dealing with ambiguity increases faith." The retired engineer in the group repeatedly returned to his claim that he now believes in God and deals with the difficult questions by faith. He interpreted this as very significant since he once "needed proof." Yet another participant explained that the theodicy trilemma is mystery, and is an investigation of his own nature as much as it is of the nature of God. A group member who attended one year of seminary observed that he had learned and assimilated more through our project than he had from his year of seminary. He commented that he is now confident that he knows how to think theologically.

One of the most striking assertions during the project was that our sessions were worship. "This time is worship, paying attention to God, trying to figure out what God is, who God is...if that isn't worship, I don't know what is..." Following this comment the group concurred that our sessions

were sacred time, similar to Jacob wrestling with God, striving to understand God's loving power.

It is difficult to capture the flavor and spirit of these group sessions. The participants' energy, commitment, and willingness to be vulnerable to one another even as they opened themselves to the fullness of God continually inspired, encouraged, and moved me. It was truly an honor and a leaping jig of grace to with this group of persons.

B. My Evaluation of the Implementation–Were the Project Goals Met?

It is my evaluation that my personal and professional goals for this model of ministry were met.

Through the assigned and additional reading I increased my knowledge of the current theological literature regarding theodicy. My basic conclusion was that the prevailing theme in the current literature is abuse of power, either on God's part or humanity's. Of the books studied not one was theodicy proper in that it offered an explanation of the origin of evil. Current thinkers seem to be examining societal evils, racism, sexism, child and sexual abuse, for example, through the theodicy microscope. Although I found some of the conclusions lacking, this review of current literature was stimulating in that it re-engaged my own thought regarding theodicy and helped to focus

my questions and concerns. I look forward to following the ongoing debate regarding theodicy.

Writing and re-writing the theological foundation section of this document and discussions in the peer seminar helped me to clarify and claim my personal, theological beliefs, specifically regarding kenosis christology as it relates to the concept of power. Evidence of my willingness to claim these convictions was demonstrated throughout the sessions as I "unspooled" them in the group. Participants remarked upon my willingness to risk sharing my deepest beliefs even if it meant allowing them to walk through my times of doubt. In the next chapter I will discuss my conclusions regarding the value of risk-taking on the pastor's part.

Another goal was to reconcile my theology, in light of my rejection of theism and its eschatology, to particular liturgies of the church, particularly the funeral liturgy. This goal was accomplished through theological study and discussion in the peer seminar. Although I cannot pinpoint how or when this took place I recognize that I no longer feel the "theological dissonance" I sometimes felt when reviewing certain aspects of the funeral liturgy. My perception is that I am now able to interpret the liturgy through my own relational theology.

This model of ministry did test my claim that one's image of God is directly related to how one lives one's life, especially in response to crisis.

The participants helped me consider this through their experiences and through their interpretations of the actions of some of the characters in the films. For example when we viewed *Crimes and Misdemeanors* they pointed out that the character who feared God's judgment and saw God as wrathful lived a scared, embittered, cynical, and ultimately deceitful life while the character who proclaimed God's faithful presence lived a life of integrity which seemed to emulate that assurance and calm loving faith.

While I continue to hold fast to this claim I am now considering the possibility of its inverse being true as well (as I mentioned when I was discussing input from my consultants). Do some persons' conceptions of God grow out of their experiences of tragedy or of life in general? This is an interesting question in that it raises the conundrum of creating a God out of our own experiences–which I admit we all do to some extent. Indeed it is difficult for me, if not impossible, to extricate experience from concept formulation. The key here, however, is that by experience I do not necessarily mean my own personal experience. In other words I do not have to directly experience an evil deed to know that such a deed is evil–communal experience adds to my understandings and perceptions. In addition to a few comments on this topic in the next chapter I am sure that I will continue to ponder these interconnections even as I continue to hold to my claim.

As far as my goal to continue to develop a resource list of accessible media from popular culture which raise theological issues I cannot imagine not continuing such a list. Almost every novel I read and every other film I see become a part of such a list, and now others are adding their contributions. In one of our consultations Erin McGraw observed that Hollywood, with all its crassness and crudity, is continually drawn to substantial, dare we say, theological subjects. There is a universal, perhaps archetypal longing to respond to the intricacies and mysteries of our existence.

The observations and comments of the class members convinced me that this model of ministry provided a framework and format of study which will help others reflect theologically, about their own lives and the culture in general. It is also clear that the use of stories and film helped persons define their concepts and images of God.

The last goal was to develop a course of study usable across the church. I know that I will continue to develop this model and will use it again in congregations I serve. Other persons who were aware of my work on this project asked for advice on implementing similar programs in their churches; I know of one church that then participated in such a program. However, in its current form it is not available as curriculum per se, that is, it is not a solidified grouping of lessons ready to be published for formal use

across the church. It is, I believe, a model which can be easily replicated in other congregations whether a congregation's interest in the theodicy issues or merely in using non-theological material as springboard for theological reflection and spiritual growth.

CHAPTER X:

AND THE JIG GOES ON: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The results of this model of ministry reinforced my contention that persons hunger to wrestle with the issues of theodicy, not as abstract theological discourse but so as to work through the "stuff" of human existence as they seek to grow closer to God. I also believe that many persons have been wounded by oppressive images of God that lead to fear and confusion. It is crucial that the Church provide not only a haven for the healing of these images but also a well of images upon which the thirsty can draw. The Church must also discover ways of sharing the fullness of God with new generations without "whipping them into shape" with threats of an angry and powerful-as-the-world-knows-power god.

Furthermore, in listening to the experiences of the course participants I have concluded that one's images of God are indeed related to how one responds to crisis. As persons shared their spiritual journeys, connecting beliefs at particular stages to reactions to crises during those same times, I was struck by the connections. For example, at a stage when a person's controlling image of God was angry judge it was difficult for that individual

to experience God's mercy and forgiveness. Interestingly, the converse does not appear to be true. Persons whose images of God are loving and merciful seem to have little trouble conceiving God's righteous anger and judgment.

However, I continue to ponder whether my contention is accurate only for those who are a part of the church. Is the reverse statement more accurate of others, that is, do their daily experiences and experiences of crisis determine their images of God? This needs more pondering as it may have ramifications for reaching out to those who are "unchurched" and also for recognizing the potential for this way of thinking in those who are "churched" now but who were not trained in the traditions of scripture, doctrine, and piety.

Given the theodicy trilemma each participant concluded that evil exists and that God is good. One participant suggested that evil exists but that we might understand it better some day; although she could not imagine an acceptable explanation for the kind of evil she has observed as one who has lived through most of this century. Several were undecided as to evil's origin, however, two members concluded that all evil is human-made and derives from free will. One participant reacted against this conclusion as it seemed too hopeless, are her children at the mercy of some stranger's free choice to hurt them? As she considered this she recognized that her children are indeed at such risk; she just doesn't want to admit that such evil lurks in

humanity. On the other hand she did not want to attribute it to God or to some other power. The two who attributed all evil to humanity said they live in the hope that humanity can be transformed as more persons become instruments of God's grace, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." However, they quickly admitted that some days hope flags in light of the evils amongst us.

Each group member conceived of God as loving, as good, and as suffering with us when we suffer. Several asserted that they could not, would not worship an abusive god or a god who is benevolent one moment and cruel the next. Such a god may be feared but not trusted or loved or praised. God's goodness is best revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

There was less concurrence concerning the concept of God's power. While almost everyone agreed that God's power is not coercive or unilateral power and that it is best defined by the self-giving life and death of Christ, there were varying opinions as to whether God's power is limited. Most seemed to conclude that God has more power than any other "entity" but that God does not have all the power that exists. Humans have the power of free will and nature has the power to create and to destroy. Some participants concluded that God limited God's power purposely for some unknown reason; others concluded that God's power was "automatically" limited when God chose to give humanity free will. A few decided that God is still ordering creation, the system is continually being crafted; therefore, God's power is

limited through the very nature of the system, that which has not yet been ordered has power too. One person mentioned the power of Satan which works against God's power but she also stated that she did not mean Satan as a literal being. In response to her comments another person mentioned that perhaps Satan is whatever tempts us away from that which we know to be right and good.

The overwhelming conclusion seemed to be that God is loving and gracious and as beings created in God's image humans are to be instruments of God's goodness. However, since we have real freedom of choice we can choose to "cooperate with God" or not. We need to learn to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate the signs of God's goodness in our midst, even the smallest glimpse. Taking courage, encouragement, and hope from these signs we need to be co-creators with God so that we add to the goodness. As one participant put it,

> God provides what we need so that we can produce goodness. Given the responsibility for making goodness happen is a large, life-long task that is worthy of each of our labors. The journey of providing goodness is what is most important in our lives. This journey reflects God and God's purpose for us. In this we may have a partial answer to 'Who is God?'

Reflecting upon the implementation of this project I pondered the time frame. It seems to me that any examination of theodicy has the potential to overload the participants' sensibilities and energy especially since consideration and confrontation of evil is crucial to any serious discussion of the topic. A course in theodicy must be long enough to cover the issues while not wallowing in them. There were times in this course when the session felt

packed, so much to discuss as we followed the format, so much to consider as tangential conversation was pursued. Did we need more sessions or would we end up walking already traveled road if were meetings were added? My conclusion was that thirteen sessions were about right, we probably could have covered the material in twelve but it was helpful to have the "extra" session to gather up issues that had been mentioned throughout the course but not fully discussed. It was also important to have a session set aside for evaluation and reflection.

Due to the time constraints the group did not read and reflect upon a novel although several were recommended and discussed briefly. Since the short stories enriched our dialogue I find myself still wishing that we could have included a novel in the lesson format. Perhaps it might have been feasible to assign a short novel prior to the first session. However, I think the context associates made a good decision when we agreed to use two short stories and ten films over the course of thirteen weeks.

Finally, as I consider what I learned from this model of ministry I recall how I was repeatedly struck by my own vulnerability as the group moved through this course of study. When one who is named pastor, preacher, prophet pursues the questions of theodicy within the church, it is not without risk. I could not help but share my own journey, my own doubts, my own beliefs, and my unbelief. It is gratifying yet sometimes disconcerting

to realize that people *are listening*. "Julie, do you believe what that hymn said this morning, do you believe God really will take care of us?" "Do you believe God can protect us?" "Tell us what you have concluded concerning these issues of theodicy." There is also risk in encouraging persons to voice their unvoiced questions, to hear the questions of others, and to stir up the issues concerning evil and suffering, God's power and goodness. Herein lies the risk of disrupting faith not toward new growth but toward despair. Throughout the course, perception checks with the participants were important to our process and to my peace of mind.

Toward the end of the project several participants pointed out the risks I was taking as pastor and shared with me that they had received this as gift, as a model of trust and self-giving. I experienced this as grace, unexpected and amazing. Who but God could take my vulnerability and transform it into empowerment for another? Perhaps this is what finding power in weakness means...

This model of ministry, actually, the participation of the people of Eastmont in this model, reinforces my conviction that pastors can and should trust the people they serve. Together we can question, seek, discover, minister, and grow as children of God.

CHAPTER XI:

SCRATCH AND SNIFF: A REPLICABLITY "PULLOUT" SECTION

As one who tends to be faithful to one fragrance I must confess that from time to time I will sniff the perfume ads so mercilessly present in many popular magazines. I can experience the fragrance without buying the perfume. Similarly, this chapter is for the reader who wants to experience the general fragrance and flavor of this model of ministry but chooses not to read the entire document. If the reader has read the document this chapter will be quite familiar as it is primarily a compilation of sections of previous chapters.

This model of ministry was a theological course of study, a project to help persons work through the issues and options of theodicy. The project's focus, however, was not on the issues of suffering, tragedy, evil, and goodness but on the nature of God in light of these realities. The purpose of this project was to provide a forum for theological reflection so that participants could grow in their understanding of the related concepts of God and God's activity in the world. This purpose was based upon my claim that one's

image of God is directly related to how one responds to life, to life's crises and tragedies, and to life's goodness.

Following a general format of study developed in conjunction with the project associates, a group of church members met weekly for thirteen weeks to discuss a video and/or short story which deals with theological issues, particularly the issues of theodicy, in non-theological ways. The use of popular culture stemmed foremost from my own propensity to "see" theological truth where it may not be intended. Throughout my life and my ministry I have not been inclined to make hard and fast distinctions between the "secular" and the "sacred." My experience is that God pops up in surprising places, even in the popular culture of rock music, film, and literature.

In addition to my own intuitive sense or propensity, it is a given, I believe, that persons today are more inclined to rent a video than to pick up a theological tome. Indeed, many may be more likely to go to the movies or turn on the television than to turn to the study of scripture. In this project movies and stories were used as "grist for the mill" of theological reflection not as "illustrations" of preconceived theological propositions.

Project participants had completed two years of intensive Bible study, *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study* and *Disciple II: Into the Word, Into the World,* and were eager to engage in further and more direct

theological reflection. They brought their biblical knowledge, their faith, and the experiences of their own lives to the project. Questions raised in our *Disciple* studies became the initial questions for this project. These questions included: What is the nature of God's power and goodness? How do we explain and respond to the problem of evil in the world? What do my beliefs about God have to do with how I live my life? How do others think on these issues? What part did culture play in the Bible stories, what role does it play in our belief systems today? What does the trilemma of theodicy mean as it is traditionally expressed, "God is all powerful, God is all good, evil exists," and is the tradition the only option?

Eight to ten women and men, ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-eight, participated in this project. As springboards for reflection and discussion we read short stories and viewed films that grapple with these issues. Not only were popular media an interesting and perhaps "easier" entree into the theological discussion, the existence of these "non-theological" theological movies and stories says something significant to the discussion itself. The classic struggle of good versus evil so prevalent in society's movies and literature reflects the universality of the issues raised by theodicy. Most often these artistic endeavors grow out of one person's quest to understand, to cope, to discover meaning. The artist connects to something within that is at once unique and universal. The uniqueness makes it art, the universality

makes it life. The artist connects within then connects without–others are able to apprehend what is being said because it speaks to something within themselves.

As members of the group engaged the storylines of various films and stories they were in some way engaging their own stories and the stories of humanity itself. We used these stories to help work through the experiences of our own lives and to help us discern what we believe about humanity, about God, and about God's relationship with us and the rest of creation.

My model of ministry, then, was to give persons an arena in which to discuss the "stuff" of their lives, the awesome delight, the heart-rending suffering, the spirit-breaking evil. To this arena, this sanctuary, folks were invited to bring their questions, doubts, fears, awe, delight, with the assurance that each journey will be heard and honored. As this project began it was my prayerful hope that healing and growth would occur and that persons would discover anew the very fullness of God, a God who is with us in the "stuff" of our lives seeking to bring about the best that is humanly and godly possible.

The design of this project was based upon information gathered during two context associate meetings and several conversations with individual context associates. From these discussions a general framework was developed for a thirteen week course which would raise the issues and

options of theodicy through the use of movies and short stories. The framework of the course of study was based upon the traditional trilemma posed in theodicy, "God is all powerful, God is all good, evil exists." Each "prong" of this trilemma became the overarching theme for a several week segment of the thirteen week course. The first session was an introduction and overview. The next three sessions focused on the topic of evil and suffering(what is evil, does evil exist, is it real or apparent, etc.). Sessions five, six, and seven examined the concept of God's power (what is the nature of God's power, what does the Incarnation tell us about of God's power, what about human freedom, etc.). Sessions eight, nine, and ten considered what it means to speak of God's goodness (what is the nature of God's goodness, is there evil within God, is there ambiguity within the Godhead, etc.). Eschatology and hope were discussed in the eleventh session. The twelfth session included a review of what had been covered and a discussion of our tentative conclusions. The last session was evaluation. Ten movies and two short stories were considered during the course of study. The media were chosen for particular weeks based upon their "connection" with the theme. Although I chose the films and stories class members participated, to some extent, in choosing their order.

Prior to the first class session, group members were asked to read Harold Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* and Leslie

Weatherhead's *The Will of God.* Each book, in its own way, provided a simple overview of the issues. C. S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed* were recommended. Also prior to the first session each class member wrote an essay describing her or his current thoughts and beliefs on these issues; this essay focused on the participants' concept of God. These essays were not shared with the entire class but were compared with essays written for the last class session. Students addressed the same questions in the second essay but included reflection upon how their thoughts were affected by the study. Though subjective this was one method of evaluating the course itself. Another means of evaluation was a survey on suffering taken the first and last session. This survey was based upon a tool prepared for the February, 1994 issue of *U.S. Catholic.*

The implementation of this model of ministry followed the course design. During the first session we reviewed the issues of theodicy as we had experienced them in our previous biblical studies and in our life experiences. The format for our session together was also described. We discussed our group covenant which included the promise of confidentiality and the importance of open communication with one another throughout the course so that we could be sensitive to each other if someone began to feel overwhelmed by the issues. The survey of suffering was taken and the paragraph about God was discussed and assigned for the next session.

The topic of evil was introduced through a series of questions which helped us begin to make distinctions between evil, suffering, "badness," and tragedy (or helped us decide there are no distinctions, depending upon one's point of view). A film and related reflection questions were assigned for the following session.

Each subsequent session began with a general discussion of the previously assigned film, including whether "God images," examples of evil, goodness, or power were evident in the film. After this general discussion we looked more carefully at the topic for the session, considering that particular issue in theodicy and the options available. For example, when considering the nature of God's power we discussed whether this power is limited and if so in what way and why as well as various options in *defining* power as it relates to God's actions. The thematic discussion was then connected back to the film as participants allowed the theological options to speak to the story of the movie and vice versa. Woven throughout the discussion were group members' own stories, including a female participant's experience of spousal abuse, which became one of the "touchstones" for the group throughout the course. The sharing of her experience, off and on throughout the study, was unplanned yet it helped us focus on the issues at hand. More importantly some healing seemed to take place for her as she saw others respond to her experience with compassion and new learning about the intricacies of living

with abuse. Each session concluded with an overview of the next week's session, the assignment of the film and reflection questions, and with prayer.

The discussions were free-wheeling, intense, and highly energized. As I anticipated, the "trilemma framework" provided an organizing guideline for our discussions, yet the topics still melded with each other as persons made connections and raised questions. I viewed this as a positive development as it demonstrated the participants' growing grasp of the issues and options involved as well as the importance of providing forums for this type of study.

As a result of this model of ministry a group of persons grew in their understanding of their faith and in their relationship with God and one another. This is reflected in their written essays and through dialogue I've experienced with each member since the course ended. For some, faith increased as they came to believe that God suffers with them and understands human suffering through the incarnation. Others commented that they grew closer to God as they broadened their understanding of who God is and how God acts. For some participants this meant continuing to shed images of God which limited their capability to truly worship and praise God; for others liberation was experienced as it was recognized that it is acceptable to ask theological questions, to ask questions of their faith. Several participants experienced clarity in their questions, deciding that discovering the "real" questions is what is critical in the growth of faith. Two

participants concluded that voluntarily dealing with ambiguity, within God, humanity, and creation, increases faith. Each participant commented that it was helpful and exciting to learn new tools and options for theological reflection.

Using popular media as an instrument for this reflection provided a common experience for the group in addition to its biblical study and shared life experiences. The films became our theology text as we moved through this study. The ten films viewed were *Schindler's List, Shadowlands, Corrina, Corrina, Crimes and Misdemeanors, Sophie's Choice, Fearless, Sandlot, With Honors, Shawshank Redemption,* and *Tender Mercies.* Through these films we were able to identify universal ideals, one participant stated, standard connotations as to what is good, bad, or redemptive. Persons commented that it was extremely meaningful to "encounter God at the movies." Participants grew in their capacity to look and listen for God in places where they would not have expected the encounter.

As the study concluded all the participants claimed strong belief in the goodness of God as goodness is normally understood. This goodness includes loving compassion, self-giving, holiness, and for some participants, a degree of ambiguity. For these persons God is not evil or abusive, yet God may at times be indifferent, or perhaps even choosing nonintervention in the human condition or particular situation. Each participant concluded that

evil does exist and is real, however, there was not total agreement as to evil's definition or origin. Defining the nature of God's power was more of a challenge to many in the group. Some concluded that God's power is shared through God's gift of free will to creation; others decided God limits God's own power and can decide to reclaim it whenever God chooses. Nevertheless, all participants tended to define God's power incarnationally; if one wants to understand what God's power is like look at Jesus. When viewed through this christological lens God's power was defined as loving, relational, and self-giving, not as unilateral and coercive.

The implementation of this project reinforced my contention that persons hunger to wrestle with the issues of theodicy, not as abstract theological discourse but so as to work through the "stuff" of human existence as they seek to grow closer to God. I also believe that many persons have been wounded by oppressive images of God that lead to fear and confusion. It is crucial that the Church provide not only a haven for the healing of these images but also a well of images upon which the thirsty can draw. The Church must also discover ways of sharing the fullness of God with new generations without "whipping them into shape" with threats of an angry and powerful-as-the-world-knows-power god.

Furthermore, in listening to the experiences of the course participants I have concluded that one's images of God are indeed related to how one

responds to crisis. As persons shared their spiritual journeys, connecting beliefs at particular stages to reactions to crises during those same times, I was struck by the connections. For example, at a stage when a person's controlling image of God was angry judge it was difficult for that individual to experience God's mercy and forgiveness. Interestingly, the converse does not appear to be true. Persons whose images of God are loving and merciful seem to have little trouble conceiving God's righteous anger and judgment.

To replicate this model of ministry the leader needs to have a fairly in-depth familiarity with the issues and options of theodicy as well as a grounded understanding of her/his own theological convictions. I think a strong and disciplined theological foundation is crucial to leading the type of discussion described above.

Although I cannot comment as to what may and may not work in cultures other than my own I think the issues are universal even though the conclusions will vary. In any project of this sort, I think it is extremely important to choose films or resources which bring a variety of cultural perspectives and images. In the films this group viewed we experienced God images through a Jew, a rich man, an African-American woman, a bum, a little girl, a twelve-year-old boy, prisoners, a bold woman, a blind man, a poor, white, southern woman, and even a dog.

The issues of obscene language and violent or sexually explicit scenes in movies also need to be addressed in any congregational setting where contemporary films are viewed. Each leader will need to know the particular ethos of his/her context. Personal judgment comes into play with each choice; I have seen films which are in great dialogue with theological issues but I would not choose to show them within the context of the church due to extreme profanity or shocking images (the acclaimed film *Pulp Fiction*, for example).

In this project we discussed these issues during the planning stages and in the first session and as was necessary throughout the project. We did not experience any controversy or unusual discomfort over these issues. Although I had previously seen each film I reviewed each one again prior to the beginning of the series keeping the language, sex, and violence issue uppermost in my mind. If I felt skittish about particular scenes I discussed my concerns with the team helping to plan the project and with the project members themselves. The attitude of the group before, during, and after the project was that the message of each film outweighed and overshadowed the other issue. I recognize that this is not true for all persons, nor would it be true in all congregations. It is important to remember that the persons involved in this model of ministry had been doing Bible study together twelve

to thirty-six months. We were not strangers to one another, we had previously built a community of trust, humor, and understanding.

As I consider what I learned from this model of ministry I recall how I was repeatedly struck by my own vulnerability as the group moved through this course of study. When one who is named pastor, preacher, prophet pursues the questions of theodicy within the church, it is not without risk. I could not help but share my own journey, my own doubts, my own beliefs, and my unbelief. There is also risk in encouraging persons to voice their unvoiced questions, to hear the questions of others, and to stir up the issues concerning evil and suffering, God's power and goodness. Herein lies the risk of disrupting faith not toward new growth but toward despair. Throughout the course, perception checks with the participants were important to our process and to my peace of mind.

Toward the end of the project several participants pointed out the risks I was taking as pastor and shared with me that they had received this as gift, as a model of trust and self-giving. I experienced this as grace, unexpected and amazing. Who but God could take my vulnerability and transform it into empowerment for another? Perhaps this is what finding power in weakness means...

This model of ministry, actually, the participation of the people of the church in this model, reinforces my conviction that pastors can and should

trust the people they serve. Together we can question, seek, discover, minister, and grow as children of God.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

GENERAL THEOLOGICAL

Beardslee, William, et. al. *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.

An anthology of essays on the death of Jesus, written by biblical scholars, historians, and theologians. Each chapter is written from a process theology perspective. Two sample sermons are included.

Blumenthal, David R. *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.

As Rita Brock comments in the foreword reading this book is "excruciating joy." In this powerfully written theology of protest, Blumenthal argues that although God is often loving and kind there is within God the capacity to be abusive. Basing his argument upon scripture and the experiences of Holocaust and child abuse survivors Blumenthal claims we must face the fullness of God, continuing to worship even as we confront God's abuse. He includes his correspondence with an adult survivor of child abuse and with a Christian feminist theologian.

Boff, Leonardo. *Jesus Christ Liberator.* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978.

Written from a Latin American liberation theology perspective, this work was invaluable to me early in my christological study and remains influential. Particularly helpful are chapter ten and thirteen, focusing respectively on the humanity/divinity question and on christic structure.

Brueggemann, Walter. "A Shape of Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (January, 1985): pp. 28-46. "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain."

Catholic Biblical Quarterly 47 (July, 1985): 395-415. Chapters 1 & 2 of *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text.* Fortress Press, 1992.

Helpful articles which articulate the "minority report" apparent in the Old Testament. Underscoring the relational life of God, Brueggemann maintains there is unresolved and unresolvable tension not only within the Old Testament witness but within God.

Cobb, John. *God and the World.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969.

As Cobb states in the preface this is a book about how God is in the world and how the world is in and from God. There is no choosing one without the other. Chapter four, the section treating the problem of evil, redefines what it means to speak of God's omnipotence.

Cone, James. *A Black Theology of Liberation.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1970, esp. ch. 7.

An important work, Cone was the first theologian to give voice to the theological import of the black revolution within the context of black religion. An indictment against white theology and society, Cone declares that Christian hope means nothing unless it is related to liberation now.

Cooper, Burton. *Why, God?* Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

As one who has experienced the tragic deaths of two of his own children Cooper examines the classic questions of theodicy. Encouraging persons to examine these questions unafraid, this text could be helpful to clergy and lay alike.

Davis, Stephen, ed. *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy.* Atlanta: John Knox, 1981.

Articles by John Roth, John Hick, Stephen Davis, David Griffin, Frederick Sontag, and John Cobb offering various theodic options. Each article is followed by critiques and then the author's response. This was helpful to me early in my studies as an overview of options and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Farley, Wendy. *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990.

Though not a theodicy, per se, in that she does not answer the question of evil's origin, Farley offers an option other than classic Christian theodicies. Noting the tragic structure of creation Farley advocates resistance and redemption as a means of participating in and promoting God's true power: compassion.

Fretheim, Terence. *The Suffering Of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

I have read certain sections so many times my copy of the book is falling apart! Fretheim eloquently argues for an organismic model of God over against the monarchical model prevalent in contemporary Old Testament interpretation. In the former model God's relationship to the world is real and has integrity; God is internally related to the world. A very helpful book for anyone interested in Old Testament theology and in concepts of God.

Garrison, Jim. *The Darkness of God: Theology after Hiroshima*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.

Choosing to retain the traditional understanding of the power of God while recognizing the existence of genuine evil, Garrison rejects God's goodness as it is traditionally defined. Within the godhead exists genuine evil and genuine good.

Griffin, David. *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976.

A statement of the problem in which Griffin discusses the concept of "genuine evil." This is followed by a long historical survey of the power of God in the major theologians in Western theology, culminating in what has become the classic statement of process theology.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987.

Linking the suffering of Job with the suffering of the poor and oppressed of our day, Gutierrez examines the questions of good and evil from the perspective of liberation theology.

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love.* San Francisco: Harper, 1978.

One of the most frequently used references early in my study of theodicy. Hick gives excellent overviews of the two most prevalent and contrasting "answers" to the problem of evil: the Augustinian view and the Irenaean. Hick is drawn, as am I, to the latter point of view and uses this as the foundation for his own constructive thought. We part, however, with his conclusion: the mystery of evil will unravel in the light of a future good which will be so good that all of human experience, including that which has been most horrible, will be rendered acceptable.

Inbody, Tyron. "Religious Empiricism and the Problem of Religious Adequacy." In Michael Shermis, ed., *The Writings of Larry E. Axel: Studies in Liberal Religious Thought.* Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, 247-260.

A personal response to the untimely death of a friend. This statement pays eloquent tribute while defending the religious adequacy of an empiricist theodicy.

_____. *Take The Even, Take The Odd.* Unpublished manuscript, 1994.

From a process theologian's perspective Inbody examines the issues of theodicy and its various options clearly and concisely. Reviewing and ultimately rejecting the classic view, Inbody presents contemporary trends concluding with his own process thought. This text, when completed, will be a helpful addition not only in the theology classroom but in the pastor's study.

Kushner, Harold. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* New York: Avon, 1981.

Kushner looks at the problem of suffering from his experience as rabbi and as one who has suffered the death of his own son through a inexplicable disease.

LaCugna, Catherine, ed. *Freeing Theology*. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

Ten theologians, writing from feminist perspectives, examine various issues in contemporary theology. Elizabeth Johnson's chapter on christology, "Redeeming the Name of Christ" and LaCugna's on the Trinity, "God in Communion With Us" were especially helpful.

Lane, Belden, "A Hidden and Playful God," *Christian Century*, (30 September 1987): 812-13. "God Plays Rough for Love's Sake," *Christian Century*, (14 October 1987): 879-81. "Fierce Landscapes and the Indifference of God," *Christian Century*, (11 October 1989): 907-10. "Dragons of the Ordinary: The Discomfort of Common Grace," *Christian Century*, (21-28 August 1991): 772-75.

Among the most provocative articles I have read. Lane argues for a God who teases and plays rough because "he" loves us. These articles angered me yet gave me much to ponder. The article on God's indifference raises important questions concerning the transcendence and immanence of God.

Levenson, Jon. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

A redefinition of God's omnipotence based upon the original Hebrew conception of God. Argues that God's mastery of creation is not complete; God ordered chaos but did not eliminate it.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed.* New York: Bantam, 1961.

Reconsideration of *The Problem of Pain* in the face of personal tragedy and grace. The concept of "God as the cosmic sadist" is explored.

_____. *The Problem of Pain.* Macmillan, 1962.

Very influential version of the classic Western theodicy in which God sends our pain and suffering for our spiritual growth and well-being.

Lochman, Jan. *The Faith We Confess.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

An outline of basic Christian doctrine based on the Apostles' Creed. Indebted to the leaders of the Czech reform, Lochman

emphasizes ecumenical accord, "pilgrim theology," and theology set in the context of the church.

Loomer, Bernard. "The Size of God." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (January and May 1987): 20-51.

Given that the world as we know and experience it is our reality and that God is identified with this concrete world, then God, like the world is ambiguous. Loomer concludes that an ambiguous God is of greater stature than an unambiguous god. God is in relationship with the world and is therefore affected by the world.

_____. "Two Kinds of Power." *Criterion* (Winter 1976): 11-29.

Loomer eloquently argues that the god of unilateral power is an idol, not large enough to be worthy of our faith and worship. The power of God is relational power; it is inextricably related to the ambiguity of our concrete existence. Relational power requires greater "size" than unilateral power. It is this size which allows the relationship to be sustained.

McGill, Arthur. *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968.

Focuses on the concept of power, demonic power that is destructive and dictatorial and God's power that is creative and self-giving.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology.* New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

In this crucial volume Moltmann considers the nature of God in the cross of Christ who is abandoned by God. Grounded in a trinitarian understanding Moltmann understands the Christ event on the cross to be the nucleus of everything Christian theology says about God. In this event God experiences what it means to be human as God is emptied of what it means to be God; simultaneously humanity experiences the first fruits of God's realm. Chapter six is especially helpful.

Moser, Nellie M., ed. *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study.* Nashville: Graded Press, 1987.

Park, Andrew Sung. *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

Gives central place to the pain, the *han*, of the victims of sin. This is not a theodicy but an attempt to encourage the salvation of God, the healing of God's heart through human participation in the life of Jesus Christ and Christ's mission. A helpful study, especially for those with a Western perspective on sin.

Peck, Scott. *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil.* Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Though Peck's belief that there are persons who are truly evil is a compelling one, I did not find this book helpful when I read it in 1983. A collection of case studies stemming from his psychological work this was a disappointment following Peck's insightful first work, *The Road Less Traveled.*

Poling, James. *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

A book about power and the abuse of power. Structures of domination produce suffering especially in the lives of women and children. Noting the radical ambiguity within God and the world Poling also sees the radical resilience of survivors of abuse and in this finds resistance and hope. A helpful work but its conclusions are too neat, seemingly "tacked on" to give the book a hopeful ending.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology.* Beacon, 1983.

An extremely helpful book early in my formal theological training. Not only does Ruether provide a clear feminist perspective she gives a good overview of the tradition. The "Kenosis of the Father" midrash is one of the most powerful images I've read; years later I can still feel my relief upon discovering my hopes upon the printed page.

Sands, Kathleen. *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

Although I remain unclear on Sands definition of the tragic I find this postmodern "theodicy" intriguing. Particularly in her use of

contemporary fiction, Sands presents an ambiguous reality where God's grace exists, perhaps limping, but moving nonetheless, even in the face, or perhaps especially in the face of radical evil.

Smith, Christine. *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Repentance.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

Not a theodicy text but one which confronts systemic evil as experienced in white racism, sexism, handicappism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism. Preaching as weeping, confession, and resistance is not only homiletics but a way of living, a way of responding to the radical evil in our world.

Suchocki, Marjorie. T*he Fall To Violence.* New York: Continuum, 1994.

A discussion of original sin in relational theology. Claims original sin as rebellion against creation rather than rebellion against God. Sin is any action which contributes to the ill-being of creation, the earth and its creatures; forgiveness is willing the well-being of survivor and violator. The final chapter on provides new insight as to what forgiveness is and what it is not.

Townes, Emilie, ed. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Sin & Evil.* Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1993.

An anthology of articles, written by womanist theologians, which explore the problem of evil and suffering from various perspectives. Grant's essay on servanthood is especially helpful as it addresses the possible pitfalls of a kenotic theology.

Vieth, Richard. *Holy Power, Human Pain.* Bloomington: Meyer Stone, 1988.

The omnipotence of God is the power of God's compassion. Vieth argues for a God who suffers with us and knows what it is to be abandoned. Includes a discussion of demonic power as it relates to human decision. Leaves many questions unanswered yet recognizes the power of liturgy, of drama, and story in the face of the unanswerable.

Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will of God.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1944, 1972.

A helpful, albeit preliminary, discussion of the issues of theodicy; this is a collection of sermons preached during World War II.

Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993.

A series of essays by Williams describing womanist experiences, issues, and dilemmas followed by a womanist perspective on specific theological issues: God, redemption, liberation theology, ethics, the Black church.

Wink, Walter. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984.

Exegetical study of the biblical, especially New Testament, concept of the principalities and powers.

_____. *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986.

This second volume in the series on the powers discusses the concepts of Satan, the demons, and the angels. The distinctive contribution of this book to the current discussion is Wink's concept of "the angels" of the church and the nations.

_____. *Engaging the Powers.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Confronting and engaging the "Powers" in order to transform them, Wink eloquently encourages creative nonviolence.

CULTURAL STUDIES

Carlson, Paula and Peter Hawkins. *Listening for God.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

A collection of stories by eight different authors, some of whom are self-described Christians, others whose faith commitments are harder to categorize. Observations about each author/story precede each story and discussion questions follow. The book's purpose is to help the reader discern God in the unexpected and to discover how life and faith intersect in surprising ways and circumstances. A great collection.

Hansen, Ron. "Writing as Sacrament." *Image* 5 (Spring 1994): 53-58.

Fiction writer Hansen, author of *Mariette in Ecstasy* as well as other novels and short stories, describes writing as a sacrament "insofar as it provides graced occasions of encounter between humanity and God." When I met Hansen in the fall of 1993 we discussed the stressful path his work had followed as he struggled to bring his Christian thought to his writing. Akin to answering a call to ministry one has tried to ignore, Hansen discovered his theology would not be quiet. This development is acknowledged in this article as he shares his philosophy, that is, theology of writing.

Jewett, Robert. *Saint Paul at the Movies.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Claiming that Americans are more influenced by popular culture than by their religious training or formal education and that Paul's work took place in the everyday community of his time, the shops, the marketplace near the theatre, etc. Jewett brings St. Paul to the movies, today's arena for discovering and debating critical moral, religious and cultural issues.

L'Engle, Madeleine. "Interview with Madeleine." Interview by Neil M. Alexander. Cokesbury's Good Books Catalog (Fall/Winter, 1994-95): 2-3.

A brief interview with a great quote from L'Engle based upon her childhood experience, "Why is it that people hurt each other? Why don't people love each other? I learned quickly that story is the best place to explore these unanswerable questions. Facts are limited; they don't carry us very far. Story is where we look for truth."

McNulty, Edward. "Images of Christ in Art and Film: A Curriculum on Art and Theology For Adults." D. Min. diss., United Theological Seminary, 1992.

A model of ministry project which provides a curriculum for helping persons interpret the scriptures through the fine arts and the art of popular culture.

Monaco, James. *The Movie Guide.* New York: Perigee Books, 1992.

Pertinent information about movies. Includes data and brief synopsis for each entry.

Nelson, Shirley. "Stewards of the Imagination: Ron Hansen, Larry Woiwode and Sue Miller," *The Christian Century* 112 (25 January 25 1995): 82-85.

Includes interviews with Hansen, Woiwode, and Miller as well as excerpts of their work.

Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994..

A survey of movies and biblical themes juxtaposing characters from the movies with biblical characters. Issues considered include redemption, race relations, poverty and wealth, violence, gender relations, and fear.

Wall, James. *Church and Cinema.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971.

An attempt to help movie goers become film viewers, not only as to plot, characterization, theme, etc, but also as to perceiving what the film is–what vision of life is presented through the medium by the film-maker. A number of films are examined, with special attention given to films dealing with gender or race.

Woiwode, Larry. "A Conversation with Larry Woiwode." Interview by Harold Fickett. *Image,* no. 5 (Spring 1994): 72-89.

Noted as one of America's leading novelists and short story writers, Woiwode weaves themes he would name Christian throughout his writings. This is an interesting interview, covering the current status of civil discourse, commenting on the significance of Woiwode's writing and others, and upon the meaning of story. The best quote: "...the great side effect of the best of fiction–is that it teaches us how to live."

NOVELS AND FILMS

Novels

Agee, James. *A Death in the Family.* New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

I have not yet read this novel but it was recommended to me by Ed McNulty, one of my project consultants. He describes it as a moving story or a family who experiences the tragedy of sudden death.

Conroy, Pat. *The Prince of Tides.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

The story of two brothers and a sister struggling to live out lives devastated by their childhoods. A search for love, acceptance, wholeness. Rich, disturbing and beautiful.

Crichton, Michael. *Jurassic Park.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1990.

A weird yet provocative story loudly proclaiming the risks of mixing human greed, technology, and the misuse of power. Includes an excellent soliloquy by one of the characters on the nature of power.

Godwin, Gail. *A Southern Family.* New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987.

A moving story about a southern family who experiences tragedy when the oldest son murders his girlfriend; then commits suicide. Vivid characterizations and a sharp sense of the intricacies of human relationships.

_____. *Father Melancholy's Daughter.* New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991.

A tremendous story of faith, persistence and family. A young girl's mother runs away from home and is subsequently killed in a car accident. The daughter is left, not only to contemplate the reasons behind her mother's leaving, but to care for her often depressed father, and Episcopalian priest. His comment on resurrection is stunning as is his daughter's living it out, finally, in her own life.

Hugo, Victor. *Les Miserables*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1961.

A gripping story of redemption and the power of goodness. Through the extraordinary compassion of a priest an ex-convict Hugo discovers redemption and his own compassionate nature and seeks to live this out in a tortured world of poverty, revolution, and hopelessness. The book jacket claims this novel quickly became the gospel of the poor and oppressed following its original publication.

Irving, John. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989.

The circumstances of Owen Meany's life compel him to believe he is God's instrument; by the end of Irving's novel the reader will believe it also. A wonderful story of persistent friendship, the quest for truth, the reality of evil, and joy and tragedy of life. Owen Meany, as created by Irving, is Christian theologian and disciple.

_____. *The World According to Garp*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978.

A bizarre, yet fascinating story. No one's life could really be like this, and yet it oddly resonates. How does a family, an individual survive, much less, thrive, after experiencing so much trauma. Resilience and hope peek around the edges of this wryly told story.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

The story of a runaway slave's elusive quest for true freedom. A mesmerizing novel of great spiritual and theological depth. Running through the story like electric currents are several themes: What is freedom? Community versus personal responsibility? What is God's nature and how is God related to the world.

Potok, Chaim. *The Chosen*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987

A story of two Jewish boys, their friendship, their faith, their fathers, and the conflicts of growing up.

_____. *The Gift of Asher Lev*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1990.

A continuation of Asher Lev's story. Twenty years later, married and with a family, Asher confronts his past and comes to new insights through the death of his beloved uncle.

_____. *My Name Is Asher Lev.* New York: Knopf (distributed by Random House), 1992.

Asher Lev, given the extraordinary gift of seeing life and ascribing it to canvas, struggles with his responsibility to his family and his faith even as he is compelled to respond to his God-given talent. A dazzling story of a Jewish child's journey into adulthood and independence even as he learns to live in the midst of his family and community. Potok has a way of presenting universal themes in personal and provocative ways.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath.* New York: Viking Press, 1939.

An enduring story of perseverance and compassion set during the Depression. The Joad family faces almost insurmountable perils as they deal with poverty, oppression, prejudice and fear. From this book I came to know Christ more intimately.

Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice.* New York: Random House, 1979.

The disturbing story of Sophie, a concentration camp survivor. Looks deeply into the nature of madness and despair, but its main theme examines what freedom means in a world where power is easily abused.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple.* San Diego: Harcourt, Brael, Jovanovich, 1982.

Written as a series of letters Walker tells the story of Celie, a Black woman who suffered sexual abuse form her father, then abuse at the hands of her husband. This is a story of love, hope, and liberation, growing out of the friendship between women. Significant to the story are the images of God shared with Celie by Shug.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night.* Northvale: J. Aronson, 1985.

Wiesel's witness of the Holocaust, where God died on the gallows. The most powerfully excruciating book I've every had the privilege of reading Wiesel will not let us forget; we dare not. His sharing is sacred act, it is indeed writing as sacrament.

_____. *The Trial of God.* New York: Random House, 1979.

God is put on trial, indicted for allowing programs against God's children, the Jews. Wiesel based this play upon a trial he actually witnessed in a concentration camp. A gripping and thought provoking work.

Films

Amadeus. Directed by Milos Forman. Produced by Saul Zaentaz. C-158 min. Orion, 1984.

Boyz N The Hood. Directed by John Singleton. C-107min. Both Inc./Columbia, 1991.

City of Joy. Directed by Roland Jaffe. Produced by Jake Eberts. C-134 min. TriStar, 1992.

Cool Hand Luke. Directed by Stuart Rosenberg. Produced by Gordon Carroll. C-126 min. Warner Bros., 1967.

Corrina, Corrina. Directed by Jessie Nelson. Produced by Paula Mazy, Steve Tisch. C-135 min. New Line Cinema, 1994.

Crimes and Misdemeanors. Directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. C-107 min. Orion, 1989.

Dangerous Liasons. Directed by Stephen Frears. Produced by Norma Heyman, Hank Moonjean, Christopher Hampton. C-120 min. NFH/Lorimar, 1988.

Dead Poet's Society. Directed by Peter Weir. Produced by Steve M. Haft, Paul Junger Witt, Tony Thomas. Silver Screen Partners IV/Touchstone, 1989.

Dolores Claiborne. Directed by Taylor Hackford. Produced by Charles Mulvehill and Taylor Hackford. C-131 min. Columbus Tri-Star Entertainment, 1995.

Fearless. Directed by Peter Weir. Produced by Paula Weinstein, Mark Rosenberg. C-122 min. Warner Bros, 1992.

The Fisher King. Directed by Terry Gilliam. Produced by Debra Hill, Lynda Obst. C-137 min. TriStar/Hill/Obst Productions, 1991.

Grand Canyon. Directed by Lawrence Kasdan. Produced by Lawrence Kasdan, Charles Okun, Michael Grillo. C-134 min. Fox, 1991.

Grapes of Wrath. Directed by John Ford. Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck. BW-129 min. FOX, 1940.

Higher Learning. Directed by John Singleton. Produced by John Singleton and Paul Hall. C-127 min. Columbia TriStar, 1995.

It Could Happen To You. Directed by Andrew Bergman. Produced by Gary Adelson, Craig Baumgarten, Joseph Hartwick. C-101 min. TriStar Pictures, 1994.

Jesus of Montreal. Directed by Denys Arcand. Produced by Roger Frappier. C-120 min. Max/Gerard Mital, 1990.

Legends of the Fall. Directed by Edward Zwick. Produced by Edward Zwick, Bill Witt Liff, Marshall Hersadwitz. C-134 min. TriStar Picutres, 1994.

The Mission. Directed by Roland Joffe. Produced by Fernando Ghia, David Puttnam. C-126 min. Enigma/Goldcrest/Kingsmere, 1986.

On the Waterfront. Directed by Elia Kazan. Produced by Sam Spiegel. BW-108 min. Columbia, 1954.

Ordinary People. Directed by Robert Redford. Produced by Ronald L.Schwary. C-124 min. Wildwood, 1980.

Philadelphia. Directed by Jonathon Demme. Produced by Edward Saxon, Jonathan Demme. C-119 min. TriStar Pictures, 1993.

Places in the Heart. Directed by Robert Benton. Produced by Arlene Donovan. C-112 min. TriStar, 1984.

The Prince of Tides. Directed by Barbra Streisand. Produced by Barbra Streisand, Andrew Karsch. C-132 min. Barwood Films/Longfellow Productions/Columbia, 1991.

Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Produced by Danny DeVito. C-154. Universal Miramax Films, 1994.

The River Wild. Directed by Curtis Hanson. Produced by David Foster, Lawrence Turman. C-112 min. Universal Pictures, 1994.

Sandlot. Directed by David Mickey Evans. Produced by Dale de la Torre. C-101 min. Fox, 1993.

Schindler's List. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Produced by Steven Spielberg, Gerald R. Molen, Branko Lustig. BW/C-195 min. Universal/Amblin, 1993.

Shadowlands. Directed by Richard Attenborough. Produced by Richard Attenborough and Brian Eastman. C-133 min. Savoy Pictures, 1994.

Shawshank Redemption. Directed by Frank Darabont. Produced by Niki Marvin. C-142 min. Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994.

The Silence of the Lambs. Directed by Jonathan Demme. Produced by Edward Saxon, Kenneth Utt, Ron Bozman. C-118 min. Strong Heart Productions/Orion, 1991.

Sophie's Choice. Directed by Alan J. Pakula. Produced by Alan J. Pakula, Keith Barish. C-157 min. ITC, 1982.

Tender Mercies. Directed by Bruce Beresford. Produced by Philip S. Hobel, Mary-Ann Hobel, Horton Foote, Robert Duvall. C-89 min. EMI, 1983.

The Trip to Bountiful. Directed by Peter Masterson. Produced by Sterling Van Wagenen, Horton Foote. C-105 min. Bountiful/Film Dallas, 1985.

With Honors. Directed by Aleck Keshisian. Produced by Paula Weinstein, Amy Robinson. C-103 min. Warner Bros., 1994.